ORALITY, LITERACY AND THE 'SEVEN AḤRUF' ḤADĪTH

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The well known *ḥadīth* that the Qurʾān was revealed according to seven *aḥruf* (*ʿalā sabʿati aḥruf*) indicates that a certain amount of variation in the text of the Qurʾān was considered legitimate, indeed normal, in the earliest days of Islam. The dominant view among traditional scholars is that this initial allowance was then reduced by the decision of the Caliph ʿUthmān, with the agreement of the Companions, to unify the community on one textual skeleton (*rasm*), albeit allowing for various 'readings' (*qirāʾāt*), such as those of the Seven, the Ten, etc., within the confines of this *rasm*.

In this article, we consider the various traditional interpretations of the 'seven *aḥruf*' *ḥadīth*, alongside the numerous references to non-standard variant readings in the *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr* and *qirāʾāt* literature, to gain a clearer idea of the nature of this textual variation both before and after ʿUthmān's decision. At the same time, we aim to apply the insights gained from orality studies (particularly work done on the Homeric tradition) to show how the picture outlined in the traditional sources suggests an oral recitation (*qurʾān*) with an initial degree of multiformity (in this instance, 'seven *aḥruf*'), such as is characteristic of oral texts, which is then presented in a written version (known as *al-rasm al-ʿUthmānī*, or *al-maṣāḥif al-ʿUthmāniyya*) which has a much greater degree of uniformity, such as is characteristic of written texts, although a degree of multiformity is nevertheless maintained (the Seven/Ten

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Readings, etc.). Finally, we consider the course of recent Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾān in the light of these observations.

INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace among Muslims that the Qurʾān is the unchanging word of God that has been faithfully transmitted—at first orally, and then also in writing—from the time of the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, up until the present day; acceptance of the Qurʾān as the word of God is obligatory and whoever denies even one *ḥarf* of it—*ḥarf* is usually translated in this context as 'letter', but it has other meanings, as we shall see—is a *kāfir* ('unbeliever'). It is also well known among many Muslims that the current written form of the Qurʾān derives from the time of the third caliph ʿUthmān, resulting in what is known as *al-rasm al-ʿUthmānī*, i.e. the written 'skeleton' established by ʿUthmān and promulgated by him throughout the lands of Islam to the exclusion of any other possible written form; the situation before the time of ʿUthmān is, however, less well known to most. It is also well known among many that there are at least Seven Readings of the Qurʾān that are acceptable, although only those of Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim (a Kufan reading), and both Warsh and Qālūn from Nāfiʿ (Madinan readings) and, until fairly recently at least, al-Dūrī from Abū ʿAmr (a Basran reading), have survived in general use in the Muslim world. Specialist Qurʾān reciters are, of course, well aware of the details not only of the Seven Readings, but also of the Ten and, in some cases, Fourteen and more.

The Seven Readings are accepted by all Muslim authorities as *mutawātir*, that is, transmitted by multiple authorities from multiple authorities back to the time of the Prophet such that there is no possibility of the narrators having got together to forge a lie.[2] The further

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[2] See, for example, al-Bannāʾ [= Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Dimyāṭī], *Itḥāf fuḍalāʾ al-bashar fī l-qirāʾāt al-arbaʿ ʿashar* (ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbāʿ; Beirut: Dār al-Nadwa al-Jadīda, n.d.; originally Cairo: Maṭbaʿat ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ḥanafī, 1359 [1940]), pp. 6–7. For a more lengthy discussion of the *mutawātir* nature of the Qurʾān, and the difference in this respect between the Qurʾān— effectively, in this context, *al-rasm al-ʿUthmānī*— and the *qirāʾāt*—which may, by description at least, include readings seemingly related only by a number of individuals less than the number needed for *tawātur*—see, for example, al-Wansharīsī, *al-Miʿyār al-muʿrib wa-l-jāmiʿ al-mughrib ʿan fatāwī ʿulamāʾ Ifrīqiyya wa-l-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib* (ed. Muḥammad Ḥajjī *et al.*; Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 13 vols., 1403/1983), xii. 68–162, esp. pp. 148 ff.;

three readings making up the Ten are also accepted by the majority of the *fuqahāʾ* as equally authentic, and therefore valid, if not in some cases more so. However, because the community has long since become used to Seven Readings rather than Ten, one finds the status of the three making up the Ten not always overtly recognized. As for the four after the Ten that make up the Fourteen, these are generally considered *shādhdh*, or 'irregular', readings, in the sense that their *isnād*s, or chains of authority, are not considered strong or broad enough to reach the status of being *mutawātir*.[3]

In addition to these well-established readings, the relevant literature—particularly that on *qirāʾāt* ('readings') and *tafsīr* ('commentary' on the Qurʾān)—is replete with references to other readings—generally also considered *shādhdh*—attributed to various Companions and/or Successors and sometimes also to the Prophet; such readings are also to be found scattered throughout the major collections of *ḥadīth*, where one also finds evidence of a more general nature for the presence of variants in the Qurʾānic revelation.

In this article we consider the traditional picture regarding variants in the recitation of the Qurʾān, especially in light of the widely recorded *ḥadīth* (or *ḥadīths*) that the Qurʾān was revealed 'according to seven *aḥruf*' (whose meaning we shall return to later). From this it is apparent that the accepted degree of variation in the pre-ʿUthmānic period, i.e. in the time of the Prophet and the first two caliphs, was considerably wider than it later became. What is also apparent is that this level of variation does not in any way indicate a loose, unfixed text, or that there was ever more than one Qurʾān, but, rather, in the light of contemporary orality theory, that the Qurʾān is essentially a 'multiform' text, such as one would expect with a text that manifested in a society where the oral, rather than the written, was the norm. This, indeed, is implied by the term *qurʾān* ('recitation'), which is how the original, divinely preserved *kitāb* ('book') manifests on the tongue of the Messenger; it is then subsequently recorded also in the written form of a book (*kitāb*) or, more correctly, a series of pages bound together in book-form (*muṣḥaf*).

Ibn al-Jazarī, *Kitāb al-Nashr fī l-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr* (ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbāʿ; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n. d.), i. 13; al-Kāzarūnī, *Ḥāshiya*, on the margin of al-Bayḍāwī, *Tafsīr* [= *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*] (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya al-Kubrā, 5 vols., 1330 [1912]), ii. 64 (under Q. 4. 1).

³ See al-Bannāʾ, *Itḥāf*, 7.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

In this article, we are looking primarily at what the tradition has to say about itself and thus the authenticity or otherwise of our sources is not strictly speaking an issue. We are not obliged to accept everything as equally authoritative, but at the same time we would be foolish to reject the overall picture, especially as presented in such mainstream sources as the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Mālik (in its various transmissions), the Six Books of *ḥadīth*, and well-known and well-received *tafsīrs* such as those of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ʿAṭiyya and al-Qurṭubī, which, together with the *qirāʾāt* literature, form our initial frame of reference.

IBN MUJĀHID AND THE SEVEN READINGS

At the beginning of his *Kitāb al-Sabʿa fī l-qirāʾāt* (loosely, 'The Book of the Seven Readings'), Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936) says that the scholars of Islam 'differ with regard to readings as they differ with regard to legal judgements'.[4] In other words, just as there are differences in the details of the law—most easily recognized in the differences between the different *madhhab*s (schools of law)—so, too, are there differences on the level of detail with regard to how to read the Qurʾān. Similarly, just as the differences of *fiqh* were to become simplified—or we could say restricted or standardized—to four *madhhab*s (i.e. those named after Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfiʿī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, assuming a Sunnī point of view), so too did the different ways of reciting the Qurʾān become simplified—or again we could say restricted or standardized—to seven readings, in particular by Ibn Mujāhid himself, who is credited with being the first to delineate seven specific readings (*awwal man sabbaʿa al-sabʿa*).[5] Thus the Muslim today—or at least until very recently—is likely to follow one of the Four Madhhabs, and to read the Qurʾān according to one of Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings. But what are these Seven Readings, and why did these readings become established rather than any others, and what is the nature of the differences between them? In particular one might ask: If there is one divinely preserved Qurʾān, why should there be what seem to be different versions of it?

[4] Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sabʿa fī l-qirāʾāt* (ed. Shawqī Ḍayf; Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2nd edn., *ca.* 1980/1401), 45.

[5] See Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrāʾ (Das Biographische Lexikon der Koranlehrer)* (ed. G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl; Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus and Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda, 3 vols., 1932–5), i. 139.

Ibn Mujāhid organized his readers according to their geographical affiliation with the main centres of learning of early Islamic times. From Madina, he chose the reading of Nāfiʿ (d. *ca.* 169/785); from Makka, the reading of Ibn Kathīr (d. 120/738); from Damascus, the reading of Ibn ʿĀmir (d. 118/736); from Basra, the reading of Abū ʿAmr (d. *ca.* 154/770); and, last but not least, from Kufa he chose three readings: those of ʿĀṣim (d. *ca.* 127/745), Ḥamza (d. *ca.* 156/773) and al-Kisāʾī (d. 189/805).[6] So we see already that, although he chose one reader each from Madina, Makka, Damascus and Basra, he chose three from the Iraqi centre of Kufa. We do not know why he chose three from Kufa, but, as he was living in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, we may surmise that it was his greater familiarity with the local tradition that made it difficult for him to choose just one reading and so he opted to include three—from three different generations—as equally authoritative; nor, indeed, do we know why he should have chosen only seven readers, as several other options were available (see further below).[7]

We may also note that Ibn Mujāhid was active in the latter part of the third and early part of the fourth century AH, while these readers were active for the most part in the second century or, in some cases, the latter part of the first century. So there is a gap of some fifty to a hundred and fifty years before any of these regional traditions—if that is what they are—seem to have taken the form they did, and a history of some three hundred years or so in all before Ibn Mujāhid delineated the Seven Readings that were then to become standard throughout the Muslim world.

What do these readings represent? When dealing with some of the differences between readings that involve a different letter in the skeleton of the script—such as *fa-lā* or *wa-lā yakhāfu* in *Sūrat al-Shams*

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[6] Death dates relating to the first two Hijrī centuries are given here, and throughout, with the two caveats that (a) there is often uncertainty in the sources about the actual date of death; and (b) conversions of Hijrī dates into Common Era dates are often approximations, especially when no month of death is given and a Hijrī year spans more or less equal amounts of two Common Era years, in which case it is impossible even to specify which of the two years is more likely.

[7] This lack of any reason given for Ibn Mujāhid's choice is also noted by Melchert (see Christopher Melchert, 'Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Qurʾānic Readings', *Studia Islamica*, 91 (2000): 5–22, at 19), while Rabb also suggests the importance of a local connection, saying that 'Ibn Mujāhid's selection centred on authentic readings that were widespread and popularly recognized during his time, and perhaps, accessible to him in Baghdad' (see Intisar Rabb, 'Non-Canonical Readings of the Qurʾan: Recognition and Authenticity (The Ḥimṣī Reading)', *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies*, 8/2 (2006): 84–127, at 105).

(Q. 91)—Ibn Mujāhid tells us that 'this is how it is in the *muṣḥaf*s of place X and/or place Y', thus linking these readings with the written tradition of the place concerned.[8] But we should not think too narrowly about the reading of any one particular place either. Ibn Mujāhid tells us, for example, that Nāfiʿ, the man whose reading he accepted as representative of Madina, himself compiled (*allafa*)—or we could say chose—his reading from what at least two of his teachers were agreed upon.[9] In other words, some of his teachers in Madina recited parts of the text in a way that was different to what later became his reading and, by extension, 'the reading of Madina', thus indicating a measure of diversity even in Madina, the 'home' of the revelation.

The same is true for the other centres. Seven Readers was only Ibn Mujāhid's choice. Other scholars chose eight readers (e.g. Ibn Khālawayhi [d. 370/980] in his *Kitāb al-Badīʿ* and Ibn Ghalbūn [d. 399/1009] in his *Tadhkira*), including the 'extra' reading of the Basran Yaʿqūb al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 205/820-1) alongside the Basran Abū ʿAmr. Others referred to Ten Readers, including not only Yaʿqūb alongside the Seven, but also the Madinan Abū Jaʿfar (d. *ca.* 130/747-8) and the Kufan Khalaf (d. 229/844). Others referred to thirteen, or twenty, readers, or more.[10] In later times, Fourteen Readers became a third standard grouping (after the Seven and the Ten), including, in addition to the Ten, the readings of Ibn Muḥayṣin (d. *ca.* 123/741) in Makka, al-Aʿmash (d. 148/765) in Kufa, and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Yaḥyā al-Yazīdī (d. 202/817-18) in Basra. This meant, speaking geographically, that Madina was represented by two readers, Makka also by two, Basra by four and Kufa by five, but Damascus/Syria still only by one (although certain sources speak of a second, Ḥimṣī, reading associated in particular with Abū Ḥaywa [d. 203/818]).[11]

Certain additional observations seem appropriate:

1. Abū Jaʿfar, one of the Ten, was the chief Qurʾān reader in Madina in the generation before Nāfiʿ. Nevertheless, the 'standard' Madinan reading from Ibn Mujāhid's point of view was that of Nāfiʿ, which differs in many details from that of Abū Jaʿfar.[12] So, was there a Madinan standard in Nāfiʿ's time?

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[8] e.g. Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 689 (*Sūrat al-Shams*).

[9] Ibid, 61–2.

[10] See, for example, Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 33 ff.; also Rabb, 'Non-Canonical Readings', 101.

[11] For Abū Ḥaywa and the Ḥimṣī reading, see, now, Rabb, 'Non-Canonical Readings', esp. 88 and 107.

[12] Such differences are apparent from any book on the Ten Readings. A rough count reveals some forty or so minor differences between the readings of Abū Jaʿfar and Nāfiʿ in *Sūrat al-Baqara* (Q. 2), for instance, although often these

The great Madinan legal scholar, Mālik (d. 179/795), a contemporary of Nāfiʿ, referred to Nāfiʿ's reading as 'a *sunna*'.[13] How then are we to appreciate the reading of Abū Jaʿfar who, as we have said, was acknowledged as the chief Qurʾān reciter in Madina in the generation before Nāfiʿ and whose reading is preserved as one of the Ten and yet shows considerable divergence on the level of detail from that of Nāfiʿ? And how should we understand the *shādhdh* ('irregular', 'non-normative') variants recorded from Nāfiʿ?[14]

2. Yaʿqūb al-Ḥaḍramī is not one of the Seven, although he is one of the Ten (and one of Ibn Khālawayhi's and Ibn Ghalbūn's eight). In his day, though, he was the chief Qurʾān reciter in Basra, and for many years it was his reading that was used by the imāms of the Great Mosque there.[15] One feels justified in assuming, therefore, that his reading was more than just acceptable, and yet Yaʿqūb wasn't chosen by Ibn Mujāhid as the, or even a, representative of Basra.

3. Khalaf, the youngest of the Ten, had his own choice (*ikhtiyār*) of readings but one which was based firmly on the readings of the Kufans Ḥamza, al-Kisāʾī and Abū Bakr from ʿĀṣim except, Ibn al-Jazarī tells us, for (a) one reading where he followed Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim and all the non-Kufans, and (b) his preference for a small pause (*sakt*) between *sūra*s.[16] Al-Naqqāsh (d. 352/963) notes that Khalaf's reading was the only one known and used in the district (*rabaḍ*) where he lived (presumably within Baghdad).[17]

differences involve nothing more than minor differences in ways of pronouncing the same word.

[13] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 62; Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 112; id., *Ghāya*, ii. 331.

[14] Ibn Khālawayhi, for instance, mentions some thirty variants from Nāfiʿ which he presumably considers *shādhdh*, though some, involving the pronunciation of *hamza*, seem well within the 'standard' readings recorded from him: see Ibn Khālawayhi, *Mukhtaṣar fī shawādhdh al-Qurʾān min Kitāb al-Badīʿ (Ibn Ḥālawaih's Sammlung Nichtkanonischer Koranlesarten)* (ed. G. Bergsträsser; Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus/Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Raḥmāniyya, 1934), Index, 213, and the references therein.

[15] See Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 43; id. *Ghāya*, ii. 387.

[16] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 191. The reading in question is *ḥarāmun ʿalā qaryatin* (Q. 21. 95) (Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim, and the non-Kufans), rather than *ḥirmun ʿalā qaryatin* (the other Kufans).

[17] Ibn Mihrān, *al-Mabsūṭ fī l-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr* (ed. Subayʿ Ḥamza Ḥākimī; Damascus: Maṭbūʿāt Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya, *ca.* 1401/1980), 85. For al-Naqqāsh, who was originally from Ṭūs but then went to live in Baghdad, see Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāya*, ii. 186.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE READINGS

What, then, are the differences between these readings? Basically, they fall into five different types:

1. Simple differences of pronunciation not affecting the form of the word or its meaning, such as *imāla*, i.e. the fronting of the 'a' vowel, as in *kēfirīn* instead of *kāfirīn*, and *re'ē* instead of *ra'ā*;[18] *naql al-hamz*, i.e. the elision of a word-initial *hamza* when preceded by a consonant, as in *man-āmana* instead of *man 'āmana* (e.g. Q.2. 62) and *'in kānat-illā* instead of *'in kānat 'illā* (Q.36. 29, 53);[19] *tashīl al-hamz*, i.e. the elision of a *hamza* between two vowels, resulting in a vowel-glide, as in *a-ushhidū*, instead of *a-'ushhidū* (Q. 43. 19),[20] and *a-innakum* instead of *a-'innakum* (e.g. Q. 41. 9);[21] *ḍamm mīm al-jamʿ*, i.e. pronouncing the pronoun suffixes of –*kum* and –*hum* as –*humū* and *humū* (e.g. *ʿalayhimū* instead of *ʿalayhim*);[22] etc.

2. Differences of pronunciation involving a short vowel which have no effect on the skeletal form of the word and either do not affect its meaning, such as *udhn* or *udhun* ('ear'; e.g. Q.5. 45),[23] *sadd* or *sudd* ('barrier'; e.g. Q.18. 94),[24] *wa-lākini l-shayāṭīnu* or *wa-lākinna l-shayāṭīna* ('but the shaytans'; Q.2. 102),[25] or have at most a minimal effect on the meaning, such as *fī lawḥin maḥfūzun / maḥfūzin* ('preserved on a tablet / on a preserved tablet'; Q. 85. 22).[26]

3. Differences of pronunciation involving a long vowel, typically *ā* but also sometimes *ī*, which may be reflected in the spelling (but are usually not) and either do not affect, or only minimally affect, the meaning, such as *malik* or *mālik* ('king' / 'owner'; Q. 1. 3),[27] *zakiyya* or *zākiya* ('pure'; Q. 18. 74),[28] *kharju / kharāju* ('payment'; Q. 23. 72),[29] *fakihīn / fākihīn* ('jesting'; Q. 83. 31),[30]

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[18] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 145–8; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 112 (*kēfirīn*), 196–7 (*re'ē*).

[19] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 148; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 109.

[20] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 585; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 391.

[21] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 136–9; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 123–5.

[22] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 108–10; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 87–9.

[23] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 244; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 185.

[24] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 399; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 283.

[25] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 167; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 134.

[26] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 678; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 466.

[27] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 104; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 86.

[28] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 395; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 280.

[29] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 447; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 283–4.

[30] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 676; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 468.

qul / *qāla*, ('say!' / 'he said'; Q. 21. 112),[31] *wādi* / *wādī* ('valley'; Q. 89. 9),[32] *fa-mā ātāni[ya] l-lāhu* ('what Allah has given me'; Q. 27. 36),[33] etc.

4. Differences involving the marking of consonants, with no change to the basic form and only a minimal change to the meaning, e.g. *yawma naḥshuru aʿdāʾa l-lāh* / *yawma yuḥsharu aʿdāʾu l-lāh*, ('on the day when We assemble the enemies of God / on the day when the enemies of God are assembled'; Q. 41. 19),[34] *a-fa-lā taʿqilūna* / *a-fa-lā yaʿqilūna* ('Will you not then understand? / Will they not then understand?'; Q. 36. 68),[35] *fa-tabayyanū* / *fa-tathabbatū* ('then be clear / then be sure'; Q. 4. 94 and 49. 6),[36] *yaquṣṣu* / *yaqḍi l-ḥaqqa* ('He tells / decides the truth'; Q. 6. 57),[37] etc. Under this category we can also include instances where the differences relate to either letter boundaries, such as *huwa l-ladhī yusayyirukum* / *yanshurukum fī l-barri wa-l-baḥr* ('He it is who makes you travel / spreads you around the land and the sea'; Q. 10. 22),[38] or word boundaries, such as *kūnū anṣāran li-l-lāh* / *anṣāra l-lāh* ('Be helpers of Allah / Allah's helpers'; Q. 61. 14);[39] *wa-l-layli idh adbara* / *idhā dabara* ('and the night when it withdraws'; Q. 74. 33),[40] etc. (Here it should

[31] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 431; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 303 (*qāla*: Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim alone among the Ten).

[32] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 683; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 471.

[33] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 482; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 338.

[34] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 176; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 393 (*naḥshuru*: Nāfiʿ and Yaʿqūb; *yuḥsharu*: the others).

[35] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 543; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 372 (*taʿqilūna*: the Madinans, Ibn ʿĀmir and Yaʿqūb and Yaʿqūb; *yaʿqilūna*: the others).

[36] See Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 236; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 180 (*fa-tathabbatū*: the Kufans Ḥamza, al-Kisāʾī and Khalaf; *fa-tabayyanū*: the others). See also Aḥmad Mukhtār ʿUmar and ʿAbd al-ʿĀl Sālim Mukram, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt al-Qurʾāniyya* (Tehran: Intishārāt Uswa, 8 vols., 1412/1991) [hereinafter, *Muʿjam*], ii. 154, and vi. 220, where the attribution of this reading to Ibn Masʿūd (and other early Kufan readers) suggests that this is an instance of a reading of Ibn Masʿūd being preserved by the Kufan tradition.

[37] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 259; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 195 (*yaquṣṣu*: the Ḥijāzīs and the Kufan ʿĀṣim; *yaqḍi*: the other Iraqis and Ibn ʿĀmir).

[38] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 325; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 233 (*yanshurukum*: Ibn ʿĀmir and Abū Jaʿfar; *yusayyirukum*: the others).

[39] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 235; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 435 (*anṣāran li-l-lāh*: the Ḥijāzīs and Abū ʿAmr; *anṣāra l-lāh*: Ibn ʿĀmir, Yaʿqūb and the Kufans).

[40] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 659: Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 452 (*idh adbara*: Nāfiʿ, Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim, Ḥamza, Yaʿqūb and Khalaf; *idhā dabara*: Abū Jaʿfar, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn ʿĀmir, Abū ʿAmr, Abū Bakr from ʿĀṣim). According to al-Dānī, the *muṣḥaf* of the people of Ḥimṣ had *idhā adbara*, with two *alif*s: see al-Dānī, *al-Muqniʿ fī rasm maṣāḥif al-amṣār* (ed. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq Qamḥāwī; Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyyāt al-Azhariyya, n.d.), 117.

be remembered that in early 'Kufic' script, the gaps between unjoined letters are the same size as the gaps between words.)

5. Differences involving the change, addition or omission of one or two consonants to the skeletal text, with only a minimal effect on the meaning, e.g. *wa-lā / fa-lā yakhāfu* ('and/and so He will not fear'; Q. 91. 15) (see above),[41] *sārᶜū / wa-sārᶜū* ('Race each other / And race each other'; Q. 3. 133),[42] *qāla l-malaᵓu / wa-qāla l-malaᵓu* ('The group said / And the group said'; Q. 7. 75),[43] *taḥtahā / min taḥtihā* ('beneath her / from beneath her'; Q. 9. 100),[44] etc.

As can be seen, all these differences are differences on the micro-level and make little or no difference to the basic meaning. However, they clearly indicate that there is more than one way of saying certain words and/or phrases. It is also obvious that these different ways of reciting a particular word and/or phrase cannot both (assuming a two-way difference) or all (assuming more than two ways) be said at the same time: at any point of difference, one track, as it were, necessarily has to be taken rather than another, even if both, or all, tracks are perfectly valid in themselves.

SHĀDHDH VARIANTS

The variants mentioned above—and there are many like them throughout the text of the Qurᵓān, as detailed in the books on *qirāᵓāt*[45]—are all

[41] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabᶜa*, 689; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 474 (*fa-lā yakhāfu*: the Madinans and Ibn ᶜĀmir; *wa-lā yakhāfu*: the others).

[42] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabᶜa*, 216; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 169 (*sārᶜū*: the Madinans and Ibn ᶜĀmir; *wa-sārᶜū*: the others).

[43] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabᶜa*, 284; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 210 (*wa-qāla*: Ibn ᶜĀmir; *qāla*: the others).

[44] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabᶜa*, 317; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 228 (*min taḥtihā*: Ibn Kathīr; *taḥtahā*: the others).

[45] The Index to Ibn Mujāhid's *Kitāb al-Sabᶜa*, for instance, lists 703 places where there are different readings among the Seven, 41 of which involve differences in the skeleton of the text. (These 41 differences are listed in, for example, al-Dānī, *Muqniᶜ*, 106–12, where the author includes *an taᵓtiyahum / in taᵓtihim* (Q. 47. 18)—which Ibn Mujāhid does not include—but excludes *bi-ḍanīn / bi-ẓanīn* (Q. 81. 24)—which Ibn Mujāhid includes.) All of this, we should bear in mind, is in the context of a text that numbers some 77,400+ words. (For the number of words in the Qurᵓān, see, for example, Omar Hamdan, 'The Second *Maṣāḥif* Project: A Step Towards the Canonization of the Qurᵓanic Text', in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds.),

within the Seven (or Eight, or Ten) Readings, and thus have the backing of *tawātur*, that is, multiple-authority *isnād*s all the way back to the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, and thus are considered absolutely solid and reliable within the tradition. However, our sources also provide copious examples of a second degree of variant which does not have the same strength of backing, these being referred to as *shādhdh*, i.e. irregular or non-normative, readings. The readings specific to the four 'extra' readers after the Ten (who then make up the Fourteen) are considered to be of this category, but *shādhdh* variants cover a much broader degree of variation than is apparent from these extra four, whose readings are still well within the skeleton of the text as established by the Caliph ʿUthmān and well within the five types of variation mentioned above. From a consideration of the literature, we can identify a further five types of variation within the *shādhdh* variants in addition to the five already mentioned. These are:

1. Differences involving the substitution of one word for another, usually with the same meaning (i.e. synonyms), e.g. Ibn Masʿūd's reading of *al-ṣūf al-manfūsh* instead of *al-ʿihn al-manfūsh* ('carded wool'; Q. 101. 5)[46] (both *ʿihn* and *ṣūf* mean 'wool', but the latter is the more common word); ʿUmar's and Ibn Masʿūd's reading of *fa-mḍū* ('go') instead of *fa-sʿaw* ('[make an effort to] go'; Q. 62. 9);[47] or Anas' reading (or acceptance) of both *aqwamu qīlan* ('more upright in speech') and *aṣwabu qīlan* ('more correct in speech'; Q. 73. 6).[48]

2. Differences involving the omission or addition of words, e.g. the reading of *yaʾkhudhu kulla safīnatin ṣāliḥatin / ṣaḥīḥatin ghaṣban* ('commandeering every ship in good condition / every sound ship') (*ṣāliḥatin*: attributed to the Companions Ubayy, Ibn Masʿūd, Ibn ʿAbbās and the Successor Saʿīd ibn Jubayr; *ṣaḥīḥatin*: attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, Saʿīd ibn Jubayr and the

The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 812–13.)

   [46] See, for example, *Muʿjam* viii. 221.

   [47] *Muʿjam*, vii. 147. See also below, p. 13.

   [48] *Muʿjam*, vii. 253; Ibn Jinnī, *al-Muḥtasab fī tabyīn wujūh shawādhdh al-qirāʾāt wa-l-īḍāḥ ʿanhā* (ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2 vols., 1419/1998), ii. 396–7; al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr* [= *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*] (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 22 vols. with indices, 1387/1967; originally: Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 2nd edn., 20 vols., *ca.* 1373/1954–), xix. 41; also Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (transl. Uwe Vagelpohl, ed. James Montgomery; London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 77; id., *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read* (revised edn. in collaboration with and translated by Shawkat Toorawa; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 33.

Successor Qatāda) instead of simply *ya'khudhu kulla safīnatin ghaṣban* ('commandeering every ship'; Q. 18. 79);[49] Ibn Masʿūd's reading of *wa-l-dhakari wa-l-unthā* ('by the male and the female') instead of *wa-mā khalaqa l-dhakara wa-l-unthā* ('by what created male and female'; Q. 92. 3).[50]

3. Differences involving a change of word order, usually involving the transposition of elements of a phrase or the substitution of one element for another, e.g. *wa-jā'at sakratu l-ḥaqqi bi-l-mawt* ('and the agony of truth will come with death') (attributed to Abū Bakr, Ibn Masʿūd, Saʿīd ibn Jubayr, Shuʿba and Ṭalḥa) instead of *wa-jā'at sakratu l-mawti bi-l-ḥaqq* ('and the agony of death will come in truth'; Q. 50. 19).[51]

4. Differences involving the substitution of a longer phrase, or formula, for another, e.g. *wa-l-lāhu ghafūrun raḥīm / wa-l-lāhu ʿazīzun ḥakīm / wa-l-lāhu samīʿun ʿalīm*, ('God is Forgiving and Merciful / God is Mighty and Wise / God is All-Hearing and All-Seeing') etc., as indicated in the *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* literature (see further below).

5. Differences involving the addition or omission of substantial amounts of material, such as an *āya* or even a *sūra*, such as the 'verse of stoning' (*āyat al-rajm*) referred to by ʿUmar (see further below), or *Sūrat al-Khalʿ* and *Sūrat al-Ḥafd* in Ubayy's reading,[52] or the disputed status of the *Muʿawwidhatayn* (Q. 113 and 114) in Ibn Masʿūd's reading,[53] or the *sūra* which Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī said they used to recite, and used to consider the same as *Sūrat al-Tawba* in length and severity, but of which he could only remember 'If the son of Adam were to have two valleys of wealth, he would want a third, and the only thing that will fill the son of Adam's belly is earth'.[54] This is effectively the phenomenon of abrogation (*naskh*).

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[49] *Muʿjam*, iv. 7.

[50] Ibid, viii. 168. See also below, p. 14.

[51] *Muʿjam*, vi. 234.

[52] These two *sūra*s are often referred to simply as 'the two *sūra*s', rather than by their names. See, for example, Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna al-munawwara* (ed. Fahīm Maḥmūd Shaltūt; Jeddah: Dār al-Iṣfahānī, 4 vols., 2nd edn., n.d.), iii. 1009; Ibn Rushd [al-Ḥafīd], *Bidāyat al-mujtahid* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 2 vols., 7th edn., 1405/1985), i. 132 ('the people of Iraq call them "the two *sūra*s"'). For one version of the text of these *sūra*s, see Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (2nd edn. revised by Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Otto Pretzl; Leipzig: T. Weicher, 3 vols., 1909–38), ii. 34–5.

[53] See Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, iii. 1009–13; Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad* (ed. Ṣidqī Jamīl al-ʿAṭṭār; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 12 vols., 2nd edn., 1414/1994), viii. 35–6.

[54] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (eds. Muḥammad Shukrī ibn Ḥasan al-Anqarawī *et al.*; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 8 vols., n.d.; originally Istanbul: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿĀmira, 1334

EXAMPLES OF *SHĀDHDH* READINGS IN
ḤADĪTH AND *TAFSĪR* LITERATURE

Because of the importance of the category of *shādhdh* readings for our theme, we shall cite some further examples from the literature, restricting ourselves to a few mainstream *ḥadīth* sources rather than, for example, works by grammarians. Mālik's (d. 179/795) *Muwaṭṭaʾ* is one of our earliest collections of *ḥadīth*, and forms one of our earliest windows onto the early days of Islam.[55] In the *Muwaṭṭaʾ*, Mālik makes mention of the following six *shādhdh* variants, attributed in each case to one or more Companions:

i. ʿUmar used to read (*kāna yaqraʾu*) *fa-mḍū ilā dhikri l-lāhi* rather than *fa-sʿaw ilā dhikri l-lāhi* ('go to the remembrance of Allah') in Sūrat al-Jumuʿa (Q. 62. 9).[56] Both verbs mean 'to walk, or go', but whereas the first, *maḍā*, is neutral, *saʿā* implies 'to make an effort to go' and thus, in certain contexts, 'to go quickly', as in the *saʿy*, or light run, between Ṣafā and Marwa during the *ḥajj*. ʿUmar's reading thus clarifies that one should walk, rather than run, as is also indicated by other *ḥadīth*s.

ii. Both ʿĀʾisha and Ḥafṣa specified the inclusion of *wa-ṣalāti l-ʿaṣr* ('and the afternoon prayer') after the phrase *ḥāfiẓū ʿalā l-ṣalawāti wa-l-ṣalāti l-wusṭā* ('hold to the prayers and the Middle Prayer') in Q. 2. 238, when having a *muṣḥaf* copied out. ʿĀʾisha added: 'I heard that from the Messenger of God, *ṣalla l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*.'[57]

iii. In Ubayy's reading (*fī qirāʾat Ubayy*), Q. 5. 89 was read *fa-ṣiyāmu thalāthati ʾayyāmin mutatābiʿātin* ('then a fast of three consecutive days') rather than simply *thalāthati ʾayyāmin* ('three days'), without the word 'consecutive'.[58]

iv. Ibn ʿUmar read (*qaraʾa*) *fa-ṭalliqūhunna li-qubuli ʿiddatihinna* ('so divorce them at the beginning of their ʿ*idda*') rather than simply *li-ʿiddatihinna* ('at [the time of] their ʿ*idda*') in Q. 65. 1,[59] meaning that the best time to divorce

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(1916)), iii. 100 [= *K. al-zakāt: b. law anna li-bn Ādam wādiyayn la-btaghā thālithan*].

[55] For the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* being dated to the middle of the second century AH, see, for example, Yasin Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law: The Qurʾan, the Muwaṭṭaʾ and Madinan ʿAmal* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 26–7.

[56] See Mālik ibn Anas, *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlādihi, 2 vols., 1349/1930) [hereinafter *Muw.*], i. 97.

[57] *Muw.*, i. 120. Cf. Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fī l-Muwaṭṭaʾ min al-maʿānī wa-l-asānīd* (Mohammedia: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 24 vols., 1397–1411/1977–91), iv. 273.

[58] *Muw.*, i. 223.

[59] *Muw.*, ii. 35.

is at the beginning of a period of purity, which thus allows the longest time
for an *'idda* period and the maximum time for reconciliation.

v. 'Ā'isha refers to a verse about suckling—*'ashru raḍa'ātin ma'lūmātin
    yuḥarrimna* ('ten known sucklings make *ḥarām* [i.e. constitute a barrier to
    marriage]—which, she says, had been part of the Qur'ān (*fīmā unzila min
    al-qur'ān*) but had then been abrogated (*nusikhna*) by *khams(in) ma'lū
    māt(in)* ('five known [sucklings]'), which was 'part of what was recited as
    Qur'ān' (*fīmā yuqra'u min al-qur'ān*) at the time of the death of the
    Prophet.[60]

vi. 'Umar refers to the 'verse of stoning' (*āyat al-rajm*)—*al-shaykhu
    wa-l-shaykhatu fa-rjumūhumā l-batta* (roughly, 'mature men and mature
    women, stone them once and for all')—adding that they had certainly recited
    it (*fa-innā qad qara'nāhā*).[61]

As can be seen, all these variants are associated with particular
Companions, although no. (ii) is overtly attributed to the Prophet, and
nos. (v) and (vi) also indicate a broader authority, since they are
described as being part of what was recited as Qur'ān, with the clear
implication that they were backed by Prophetic, and thus divine,
authority. (It is also worth noting that 'Ā'isha's reference to the verse, or
verses, about suckling, and in particular the grammatical ending of
khams(in) ma'lūmāt(in) in the phrase *nusikhna bi-khams(in) ma'lū
māt(in)*, implies that this was not necessarily the exact wording and/or
pronunciation of the verse but rather a reference to the judgement
contained in it, i.e. its meaning.)

This backing of Prophetic, and thus implicitly divine, authority for
such variants is given overt expression elsewhere in the literature. To give
one particularly clear example: Muslim (d. 261/875) relates in his
Ṣaḥīḥ that 'Alqama, one of the companions of Ibn Mas'ūd, was asked by
Abū l-Dardā' in Damascus if he knew how Ibn Mas'ūd read the
beginning of *Sūrat al-Layl* (Q. 92). 'Alqama replied, '*Wa-l-layli idhā
yaghshā...wa-l-dhakari wa-l-unthā* ('By the night when it covers... and
the male and the female')', i.e. instead of the more normative *wa-mā
khalaqa l-dhakara wa-l-unthā* ('and what created the male and the
female'). Abū l-Dardā' said, 'I, too, heard the Messenger of God, *ṣallā
l-lāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*, reciting it that way, but these people want me to
recite *wa-mā khalaqa [l-dhakara wa-l-unthā]* and I'm not going to follow
them.'[62] As with the example of *wa-ṣalāti l-'aṣri* above, this indicates

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[60] *Muw.*, ii. 45.
[61] *Muw.*, ii. 168.
[62] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ii. 206 [= *K. al-Ṣalāt: b. mā yata'allaqu bi-l-qirā'āt*].

Prophetic authority for a different way of reciting a particular verse, in this instance involving the omission, rather than the inclusion, of words.

We find other references to the Prophet allowing such variations to what was later to become a much more fixed text. It is related in many *tafsīr*s—including those of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn ʿAṭiyya to mention but two of the more famous ones—that the Companion ʿAbdallāh ibn Saʿd ibn Abī Sarḥ al-ʿĀmidī (usually known as ʿAbdallāh ibn Abī Sarḥ or just simply Ibn Abī Sarḥ) was one of the scribes who would write down verses of the revelation, but that he apostatized when a change which he himself had inadvertently made to the end of a verse was confirmed by the Prophet, which led him to doubt the divine nature of the revelation. One version says that the Prophet dictated *ʿazīzun ḥakīm* ('Mighty and Wise') and Ibn Abī Sarḥ wrote down *ghafūrun raḥīm* ('Forgiving and Merciful') instead. He then read out to the Prophet what he had written and the Prophet said, 'Yes, they are the same (*naʿam sawāʾ*).'[63] Other versions mention that the Prophet dictated *wa-l-lāhu ghafūrun raḥīm* ('and God is Forgiving and Merciful') and Ibn Abī Sarḥ changed it to *wa-l-lāhu samīʿun ʿalīm* ('and God is All-Hearing and All-Knowing') at which point the Prophet said, 'It's the same either way (*dhālika sawāʾ*)';[64] or that the Prophet dictated *ʿaliyyun ḥakīm* ('High and Wise') and Ibn Abī Sarḥ asked, 'Or *ʿalīmun ḥakīm* ('All-Knowing and Wise')?' and the Prophet said, 'Yes. Both are correct (*kullun ṣawāb*)';[65] or that the Prophet would dictate *samīʿan ʿalīman* ('All-Hearing and All-Knowing') and Ibn Abī Sarḥ would write down *ʿalīman ḥakīman* ('All-Knowing and Wise'), or the Prophet would say *ʿalīman ḥakīman* and Ibn Abī Sarḥ would write down *samīʿan ʿalīman*.[66] As a result of this seeming confirmation of his own words being the words of the revelation, Ibn Abī Sarḥ, we are told, was overwhelmed by doubt, arguing that if his own words were being accepted as divine revelation in this instance, how could he trust that the rest of the revelation was of truly divine origin?[67] (In a different report, also transmitted by Ibn ʿAṭiyya and others, it is said that it was Ibn Abī Sarḥ's spontaneous addition, and the Prophet's subsequent confirmation, of the phrase *fa-tabāraka l-lāhu aḥsanu*

[63] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* [= *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*] (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 30 vols., 1398/1978; originally Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibāʿa al-Amīriyya, 1330 [1912]), vii. 181 (under Q. 6. 93).

[64] Ibn ʿAṭiyya, *Tafsīr* [= *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-ʿazīz*] (Mohammedia: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 16 vols., 1395–1411/1975–91), vi. 108 (under Q. 6. 93).

[65] Ibn ʿAṭiyya, *Tafsīr*, ix. 225 (under Q. 23. 14).

[66] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vii. 181 (under Q. 6. 93).

[67] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vii. p. 181 (under Q. 6. 93).

l-khāliqīna ('and blessed be God, the best of creators') at the end of verse 14 of *Sūrat al-Muʾminūn* (Q. 23) that was the occasion of his doubt and apostasy, although this 'addition' is also attributed to ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.)[68]

We note in passing that, while this initial possibility of change and/or substitution may seem surprising to some (as it presumably did to Ibn Abī Sarḥ), it is a possibility that is referred to approvingly elsewhere in our sources. We shall see shortly, for example, how the concept of the Qurʾān having been revealed according to 'seven *aḥruf*' is understood to include the substitution of precisely the above-mentioned formulas— *ghafūrun raḥīm*, *samīʿun ʿalīm*, *ʿazīzun ḥakīm*, etc.—one for another, 'as long as you do not end an *āya* of punishment with mercy, or an *āya* of mercy with punishment'. What this suggests, then, is a kind of *sunna taqrīriyya* ('*sunna* by way of approval') which Ibn Abī Sarḥ failed to recognize or accept.[69]

IBN MASʿŪD'S READING

We referred above to Ibn Masʿūd's reading in the context of Abū l-Dardāʾ reciting *wa-l-dhakari wa-l-unthā* in *Sūrat al-Layl* and his unwillingness to discard a reading that he had learnt directly from the Prophet for anyone else's reading. In a similar vein, Ibn Masʿūd is said to have reacted strongly against ʿUthmān's decision to impose one textual skeleton on the whole community, feeling that his own knowledge of the Qurʾān was at least as good as, if not better than, that of Zayd ibn Thābit, the Companion entrusted with the task of overseeing the 'definitive edition' of the Qurʾān in ʿUthmān's time. As Ibn Masʿūd put it, 'I had learnt seventy *sūras* from the mouth of the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, while Zayd was still [a boy] with two sidelocks playing with the [other] children.'[70]

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[68] Ibn ʿAṭiyya, *Tafsīr*, vi. 108 (under Q. 6. 93), xi. 225 (under Q. 23. 14); al-Bayḍāwī, *Tafsīr*, ii. 198 (under Q. 6. 93); al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, vii. 40–1 (under Q. 6. 93).

[69] For the concept of *sunna taqrīriyya*, see, for example, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Khallāf, *ʿIlm uṣūl al-fiqh* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 11th edn., 1397/1977), 36–7; Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Uṣūl al-fiqh* (Cairo [?]: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, *ca*.1377/1958), 105; ʿAbd al-Karīm Zaydān, *al-Wajīz fī uṣūl al-fiqh* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1405/1985), 167.

[70] Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, iii. 1005–6; Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1405/1985), 21. Cf. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ii. 71.

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence—of which the following are just examples—that Ibn Masʿūd's reading maintained its existence for some considerable time after ʿUthmān's pronouncement—although, it seems, predominantly in an oral rather than a written form. Ibn Masʿūd died in 32/652, but Ibn Mujāhid cites a report from the Kufan scholar and Qurʾān reader al-Aʿmash (60–148/680–765), one of the Fourteen, to the effect that he had seen the people of Kufa at a time when 'the reading of Zayd among them was not any different to how the reading of ʿAbdallāh [ibn Masʿūd] is among you today, with only a man or two reciting it.'[71] This implies that Ibn Masʿūd's reading was, for some time after his death and into the lifetime of al-Aʿmash, the dominant one in Kufa. The famous Kufan Successor Saʿīd ibn Jubayr (d. ca. 95/713-14), for his part, is said to have led the prayer during Ramaḍān alternating from one night to another between the reading of Ibn Masʿūd and the 'reading of Zayd', i.e. the 'standard' text.[72] Indeed, it seems likely that Ibn Masʿūd's reading continued to be used in Kufa until al-Ḥajjāj (ʿAbd al-Malik's governor of Iraq) made a concerted effort around the year 84 or 85/703–4 to prohibit it and re-impose the standard ʿUthmānic text—albeit with a few changes of spelling involving in particular the letter *alif*.[73] Furthermore, in Madina in the second century AH, Mālik delivered the judgements that doing the prayer behind someone reciting the reading of Ibn Masʿūd was invalid, and that the political authorities should prevent anyone from selling a *muṣḥaf* written according to that reading or reciting it, and should punish anyone who did so.[74] The implication of Mālik's judgements would seem to be that some people at that time were still familiar enough with Ibn Masʿūd's reading, and that there were even some copies or parts of it that had survived—perhaps such as those that Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995), the author of the *Fihrist*, mentions and, in one case, claims to have seen[75]— for this to have been an ongoing issue worthy of comment. At the same

[71] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 67.

[72] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāya*, i. 305.

[73] See, now, Omar Hamdan, 'The Second *Maṣāḥif* Project', esp. 798–801.

[74] See *al-Mudawwana al-kubrā*, opinions of Mālik, Ibn al-Qāsim and others, compiled by Saḥnūn (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda, 16 vols., 1323–4 [1905–6], i. 84 (doing the prayer behind someone reciting according to the reading of Ibn Masʿūd); Ibn Rushd [al-Jadd], *al-Bayān wa-l-taḥṣīl* (ed. Muḥammad Ḥajjī; Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 20 vols., 1404–7/1984–7), ix. 374 (preventing the writing, or recitation, of Ibn Masʿūd's reading).

[75] Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Istiqāma, n.d.), 46 [= *al-Fann al-thālith min al-maqāla al-ūlā, b. tartīb al-Qurʾān fī muṣḥaf ʿAbdallāh ibn Masʿūd*].

time, we know that Mālik recognized such readings as part of the practice of the Companions and allowed mention of them outside the specific context of recitation of the Qurʾān,[76] which allows us to say that the prohibition against reciting the Qurʾān according to such readings was not because they were in any way *ḥarām* in themselves, but rather because (a) the Companions had agreed with ʿUthmān not to use them any longer for the purposes of recitation, and (b) they had done this in order to prevent dissension in the community, since protecting the unity of the Muslims was a higher priority than protecting all the possible options of how the Companions had been allowed to recite the Qurʾān. The issue, then, was political: once the caliphal edict had been issued, which had been done for the sake of the unity of the community, it was for the sake of the unity of the community that it had to be upheld. (See further below.)

THE 'SEVEN *AḤRUF*' *ḤADĪTH*(S)

All of the above reports indicate that there was a degree of variation that involved not just the pronunciation of the skeleton of the text but also variants in the skeleton itself, although without changing the basic meaning. Furthermore, this degree of variation had the backing of the Prophet, either explicitly, as in many of the instances noted above, or implicitly, on the understanding that the Companions would not have recited the Qurʾān in a way that was displeasing to the Prophet and was not an acceptable rendering of the revelation. Perhaps the classic expression of this phenomenon is the cluster of *ḥadīth*s reported from various Companions that contain reference to the Qurʾān having been revealed 'according to seven *aḥruf*' (ʿalā sabʿati aḥruf). Of these, the most widespread—which is found in Mālik's *Muwaṭṭaʾ* and all the main later collections of *ḥadīth*—is the following, in which ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb says:

I heard Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām reciting *Sūrat al-Furqān* [Q. 25] differently to the way I recited it, and it was the Prophet, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, who had taught me it. I was about to rush up to him, but I allowed him time to finish [his prayer]. Then I grabbed him by his cloak and took him to the Messenger of God, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, and said, 'Messenger of God, I heard this man reciting *Sūrat al-Furqān* differently to the way you taught me.'

[76] See Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Tamhīd*, viii. 292; al-Wansharīsī, *Miʿyār*, vol. xii. 111 (both citing Mālik's views as transmitted in the *Kitāb al-Targhīb* of Ibn Wahb's *Jāmiʿ*).

The Messenger of God, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, said, 'Let him go.' He then said, 'Recite, Hishām', and Hishām recited in the same way that he had done before. The Messenger of God, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, said, 'It was sent down like that.' He then told me to recite, and I did so, and he said, 'It was sent down like that. This Qurʾān was sent down according to seven aḥruf (ʿalā sabʿati aḥruf), so recite whatever of it is easy [for you].'[77]

(N.B. That this ḥadīth occurs in at least five extant transmissions of the Muwaṭṭaʾ, i.e. those of the Andalusian Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā al-Laythī, the Egyptian Ibn al-Qāsim, the Basran al-Qaʿnabī, the Madinan Abū Muṣʿab al-Zuhrī and the Iraqi Suwayd al-Ḥadathānī, strongly bolsters its ascription to Mālik.)

ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/827), another early collector of ḥadīth, transmits this same ḥadīth from ʿUmar but also transmits alongside it a second 'seven aḥruf' ḥadīth, from Ubayy ibn Kaʿb (one of the best known reciters of the Qurʾān among the Companions). In ʿAbd al-Razzāq's transmission, Ubayy says:

I disagreed with one of my companions about an āya and so we went to the Messenger of God, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, about it. He said, 'Recite, Ubayy', and I did so. Then he said to the other man, 'Recite', and he did so. The Prophet, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, said, 'Both of you are right and correct (muḥsin mujmil).' I said, 'We can't both be right and correct!' The Prophet, ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, pushed me in the chest (dafaʿa [ḍaraba] fī ṣadrī) and said, 'The Qurʾān was sent down to me and I was asked, 'According to one ḥarf or two?' I said, 'According to two.' I was then asked, 'According to two ḥarfs or three?' I said, 'According to three.' This went on until we had reached seven ḥarfs. All of them are acceptable (shāfin kāfin) as long as you don't mix up an āya

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[77] Muw. i. 159–60; Muwaṭṭaʾ al-Imām Mālik ibn Anas, riwāyat Ibn al-Qāsim wa-talkhīṣ al-Qābisī (ed. Muḥammad ibn ʿAlawī ibn ʿAbbās al-Mālikī; Jeddah: Dār al-Shurūq, 2nd edn., 1408/1988), 101–2; al-Muwaṭṭaʾ li-l-Imām Mālik, riwāyat al-Qaʿnabī (ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥafīẓ Manṣūr; Kuwait: Sharikat al-Shurūq, n.d.), 134–5; al-Muwaṭṭaʾ li-Imām Dār al-Hijra Mālik ibn Anas, riwāyat Abī Muṣʿab al-Zuhrī al-Madanī (ed. Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf and Maḥmūd Muḥammad Khalīl; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 2nd edn., 2 vols., 1413/1993), i. 92–3; al-Muwaṭṭaʾ li-Imām Dār al-Hijra wa-ʿĀlim al-Madīna Mālik ibn Anas al-Aṣbaḥī, riwāyat Suwayd ibn Saʿīd al-Ḥadathānī (al-Manāma: Idārat al-Awqāf al-Sunniyya, 1410/1994), 112. See also, for instance, ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, al-Muṣannaf (ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī; Beirut: al-Majlis al-ʿIlmī, 11 vols., 1970–2), xi. 218–19; al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ (ed. Muḥammad Dhihnī; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 8 vols., n.d; originally Istanbul: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿĀmira, 1315 [1898]), vi. 100 [= K. Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān: b. unzila al-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf]; Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ, ii. 202 [= K. al-Ṣalāt: b. bayān anna al-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf wa-bayān maʿnāhu].

of mercy with an *āya* of punishment, or an *āya* of punishment with an *āya* of mercy. If [the verse ends with] *ʿazīzun ḥakīm* ('Mighty and Wise') and you say *samīʿun ʿalīm* ('All-Hearing and All-Knowing'), then Allah is All-Hearing and All-Knowing.'[78]

In a version related by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) in his *Musnad*, the *ḥadīth* ends: 'If you say *ghafūran raḥīman* ('Forgiving and Merciful') or *samīʿan ʿalīman*, or *ʿalīman samīʿan*, God is like that—as long as you do not end an *āya* of punishment with mercy, or an *āya* of mercy with punishment';[79] and, in a version recorded by Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) in his *Sunan*: 'All of them are acceptable, whether you say *samīʿan ʿalīman* or *ʿazīzan ḥakīman*, as long as you do not end an *āya* of punishment with mercy, or an *āya* of mercy with punishment.'[80]

A third, shorter 'seven *aḥruf*' *ḥadīth* is recorded by Muslim in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, from Ibn ʿAbbās, who said that 'the Messenger of God, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, said: "Jibrīl taught me to recite according to one *ḥarf*, but I kept asking him to allow me more until he stopped at seven *ḥarf*s." ' Muslim then includes the comment by Ibn Shihāb, one of the sub-narrators, that: 'I have heard that these seven *ḥarf*s all relate to where there is a single meaning (*fī l-amr al-ladhī yakūnu wāḥidan*), without there being any difference with regard to what is permitted and what is forbidden.'[81] In other words, the differences that are encompassed by the seven *aḥruf* do not affect the basic 'storyline', or meaning, of the text, but only its form: the message is always one.

Versions of either one, two or all three of these *ḥadīth*s are found in almost all of the other main third-century collections of *ḥadīth*, along with several other versions from other Companions, such as Ibn Masʿūd and Abū Hurayra, all of which include the idea that the Qurʾān was sent down 'according to seven *aḥruf*' (*ʿalā sabʿati aḥruf*). We will not attempt a complete presentation of these other versions here, although we will

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[78] ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, xi. 219–20.

[79] Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, viii. 25–6.

[80] Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, on the margin of al-Zurqānī, *Sharḥ al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Khayriyya, 4 vols., 1310/1893), ii. 12–13 [*K. al-Ṣalāt: b. unzila l-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf*].

[81] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ii. 202 [= *K. al-Ṣalāt: b. bayān anna l-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf wa-bayān maʿnāhu*]; Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, i. 671; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i. 11; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, ii. 12 [= *K. al-Ṣalāt: b. unzila l-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf*] (where only the comment by Ibn Shihāb is included). For the same *ḥadīth* without the comment of Ibn Shihāb, see also al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vi. 100 [= *K. Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān: b. unzila l-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf*]; Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, i. 566, 641; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i. 11.

have occasion to refer to some of them below. We note briefly, though, that they contain a number of recurrent themes:

1. that two or more Companions disagreed about how to recite a particular *āya* or *sūra*, with both claiming Prophetic authority for what they recited;
2. that they went to the Prophet for him to judge who was right and who was wrong but he said both were right;
3. that the fact that there could be more than one 'right' version caused considerable doubt to some;
4. that the Prophet explained that this multiplicity of versions—in the sense of linguistic variation, expressed using the phrase 'seven *aḥruf*'—had divine authority, via Jibrīl;
5. that this multiplicity of versions is to make things easy for the community, who are in general an 'unlettered' community, most of whom are not familiar with writing, or the norms of any sort of formal scripture;
6. that one should recite according to how one has learnt, while not denying that there are other ways of doing so;
7. that arguing about these *aḥruf*, and especially denying any of them—which effectively amounts to denying a part of the Qur'ān—is tantamount to *kufr*.

The important general point to make is that all these *ḥadīth*s indicate that, contrary to many people's expectations, the Qur'ān was not completely unvariable, with every vowel and consonant fixed right from the very beginning. Rather, there was a degree of variation that was clearly acceptable, expressed in the recurrent phrase 'according to seven *aḥruf*', which could involve even changes of word order and/or the substitution of one formulaic phrase for another, as long as the basic meaning and underlying message was not altered in any way.

TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE 'SEVEN *AḤRUF*' *ḤADĪTH*(S)

There is considerable discussion in the literature about the 'seven *aḥruf*' referred to in this *ḥadīth*. (For reasons of convenience, we shall assume one *ḥadīth* even though, as mentioned earlier, we are really talking about a cluster of *ḥadīth*s sharing a single main theme.) Perhaps one of the most useful and most comprehensive is that of Ibn al-Jazarī in the introduction to his book on the Ten Readings, *al-Nashr fī l-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr*, where he sets out his own understanding of the main issues involved.[82]

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[82] See Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 23–8, 31–3.

He summarizes these under ten separate headings, of which we will concern ourselves here with four only, namely:

1. What does the word *ḥarf* mean?
2. What are the 'seven *ḥarf*s' in the context of this *ḥadīth*?
3. Why are there 'seven' *ḥarf*s rather than any other number?
4. Are all seven *ḥarf*s contained in the '*muṣḥaf*' of 'Uthmān'?

We shall look briefly at each in turn, for the most part summarizing and/or paraphrasing Ibn al-Jazarī's argument.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD *ḤARF*

The basic meaning of the word *ḥarf* is 'edge, rim, brink' (*ṭarf*, *ḥāffa*, *ḥadd*), or 'aspect, side' (*wajh*, *nāḥiya*). The word is also used in a more specifically linguistic sense to refer to any of the letters which make up a word or words, and sometimes, by extension, to those words as a whole (just as one can use the word *kalima*, 'word', to refer to a group of words, or utterance, rather than just a single word). In the first of these two senses the word has the plural *ḥiraf*, while in the second it has two plurals, a plural of paucity, *aḥruf*, for a number between three and ten, and a general plural *ḥurūf* for an unspecified number above that.

The verbal form *ḥarafa* gives the idea of turning something aside or moving it from where it was (*ḥarafa al-shayʾ ʿan wajhihi* = *ṣarafahu*), in other words, changing its position. The second form *ḥarrafa* also has the idea of changing or altering the place of something, as in the Qurʾānic *yuḥarrifūna l-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihi* ('they pervert words from their places'; Q. 4. 46, 5. 13), while the fifth and seventh forms *taḥarrafa* and *inḥarafa* have the meaning of 'to turn away' or 'turn aside', i.e. to change one's position, as in the Qurʾānic *mutaḥarrifan li-qitālin* ('turning aside to [rejoin] the fight'; Q. 8. 16).

We could thus say that the Qurʾān, in being described as having 'seven *aḥruf*', is effectively being described as being in some way 'seven-sided', linguistically speaking.

Ibn al-Jazarī refers to al-Dānī's understanding that in the seven *aḥruf* *ḥadīth*, *ḥarf* refers to either (i) 'types of dialectal variation' (*awjuh min al-lughāt*), i.e. ways of using the language, in the sense that every one of them is an aspect, or 'side', of the language; or (ii) that *ḥarf* is being used in the sense of naming a thing by a part of it: a reading is called a *ḥarf*, even though it consists of many words, because in each individual case a word or letter (*ḥarf*) has been changed in some way, e.g. in its order, or in the way it is pronounced, or whether it has been added or taken away.

Ibn al-Jazarī notes that both meanings are possible, but the first fits best with the general idea of 'seven *aḥruf*' in the *ḥadīth*, while the second fits best with the idea of 'many *ḥarf*s' (*ḥurūf kathīra*) as mentioned in some versions from ʿUmar where he refers to having heard Hishām recite *Sūrat al-Furqān* with many differences (*ʿalā ḥurūf kathīra*) to the way he himself had learnt it from the Prophet.[83]

WHAT ARE THE 'SEVEN ḤARFS' IN THE ḤADĪTH?

Everyone, Ibn al-Jazarī says, is agreed, firstly, that seven *aḥruf* does not refer to one word being read in seven different ways, since that exists in only a very limited number of examples in the Qurʾān, such as *uffin* (Q. 17. 23), *Jibrīl* (Q. 2. 97), *arjih[i]* (Q. 7. 111), *hayhāta* (Q. 23. 36), and *hayta* (Q. 12. 23);[84] and, secondly, it does not refer to the seven well-known readings—even if this is what some non-specialists think—since these Seven Readers had not even been born at that time, and the first one to gather these seven together was Abū Bakr Ibn Mujāhid towards the beginning of the fourth century AH.[85]

Most scholars, he says, say that these *aḥruf* are linguistic or dialectal variations (*lughāt*, lit. 'languages', normally understood as 'dialects') but then differ as to what these dialectal variations are. Abū ʿUbayd says the expression refers to the dialects of Quraysh, Hudhayl, Thaqīf, Hawāzin, Kināna, Tamīm and al-Yaman. Others say that it refers to five amongst

[83] For such versions from ʿUmar containing the word *ḥurūf*, see, for example, al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vi. 100 (*K. Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān: b. unzila al-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf*); al-Tirmidhī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in Abū Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī, *ʿĀriḍat al-Aḥwadhī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Tirmidhī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 13 vols., n.d.), xi. 60–1 (*b. Mā jāʾa unzila al-Qurʾān ʿalā sabʿat aḥruf*); al-Nasāʾī, *Sunan* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 8 vols., n.d. [originally: Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Miṣriyya]), ii. 151 (*Jāmiʿ mā jāʾa fī l-Qurʾān*); Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, i. 98; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i. 10.

[84] For *uffin* (Q. 17. 23, etc.), see Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 379; *Muʿjam*, iii. 316–17. For *Jibrīl* (Q. 2. 97, etc.), see Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 166–7; *Muʿjam*, i. 89–91; also Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 133–4. For *arjih[i]* (Q. 7. 111, etc.), see Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 287–9; *Muʿjam*, ii. 386–7. For *hayhāta* (Q. 23. 36), see Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 312; *Muʿjam*, iv. 209–11. For *hīta* (Q. 12. 23), see Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 347; *Muʿjam*, iii. 158–61.

[85] This point has been forcefully made in a modern context by Christopher Melchert, 'The Relation of the Ten Readings to One Another', *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies*, 10/2 (2008): 73–87, at 82–4.

the Hawāzin, namely Saʿd, Thaqīf, Kināna, Hudhayl and Quraysh, and
two others that include 'all the dialects of the Arabs'. A third opinion,
recorded from Aḥmad al-Harawī,[86] is that it refers to there being seven
dialects (*lughāt*) represented in the Qurʾān, in the sense that there are
seven dialects that can be found in the Qurʾān, including those of
Quraysh, Hudhayl, Hawāzin, al-Yaman, etc, rather than there being
seven dialectal versions of the Qurʾān.

However, says Ibn al-Jazarī, this 'tribal dialect' explanation doesn't
make sense: ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and Hishām ibn Ḥakīm disagreed
about how to recite *Sūrat al-Furqān* but both were from Quraysh. In
other words, they disagreed about details although they were both from
the same tribe and spoke the same dialect.

A second possible explanation attempted by some is to suggest that the
seven *aḥruf* represent seven categories of material that are contained in
the Qurʾān, including different types of judgements (e.g. what is
permitted, what is forbidden, what is clearly stated, what is ambiguous,
what is abrogating, what is abrogated, etc.) and other aspects of content
(e.g. threats, promises, supplications, parables, stories about former
peoples, etc.). In other words, the seven *aḥruf* of the Qurʾān are to do
with content rather than form. Ibn al-Jazarī mentions four such
attempted categorizations of material, involving various combinations
of some or other of the above categories and/or others but, he says, none
of these make any sense in the context, because the Companions who
disagreed with one another and went to the Prophet for clarification
were not disagreeing about the meaning of the words but about how to
recite them. In other words, they were concerned about form rather than
content. He does acknowledge the possible counter-evidence of the
ḥadīth related from Ibn Masʿūd, by al-Ṭabarānī, to the effect that

Books used to be sent down from heaven from one gate, but the Qurʾān was sent
down from seven gates according to seven *aḥruf*: *ḥalāl* (permitted), *ḥarām*
(forbidden), *muḥkam* (clear, ongoing judgements), *mutashābih* (unclear, am-
biguous judgements), *ḍarb amthāl* (examples), *āmir* (commanding), and *zājir*
(warning). So treat what is *ḥalāl* in it as *ḥalāl*, and treat what is *ḥarām* in it as
ḥarām, act upon what is *muḥkam* in it and stop at its *mutashābih*, and take the
lesson from its *amthāl*, for all of it is from God—'but only those who have hearts
will remember'.

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[86] For Aḥmad al-Harawī (d. 401/1011), see ʿUmar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla, *Muʿjam
al-muʾallifīn* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 15 vols., *ca.* 1376/1957),
ii. 150; Khayr al-Dīn Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn, 8th edn.,
8 vols., 1989), i. 210.

But, he says, this can be explained in one of three ways: either (i) the seven *aḥruf* mentioned here are not the same as the seven *aḥruf* mentioned in the *ḥadīth*(s) about *qirāʾa*, because here they are explained as referring to what is *ḥalāl* and what is *ḥarām*, etc., i.e. categories of content, whereas in the *ḥadīth*s about *qirāʾa* they refer to different ways of reciting, i.e. categories of form; or (ii) the seven *aḥruf* do refer to the same thing in both *ḥadīth*s, i.e. different ways of reciting, but the words '*ḥalāl*, *ḥarām*...etc.' refer to the seven gates; or (iii) the words '*ḥalāl*, *ḥarām*...etc.' have no direct connection with either the seven *aḥruf* or the seven gates: it just happens that seven categories are then mentioned, as a new idea.[87]

WHY 'SEVEN' *ḤARF*S RATHER THAN ANY OTHER NUMBER?

Ibn al-Jazarī says that most people say either that there are seven basic tribal groupings among the Arabs or that there are seven 'pure' dialects (*al-lughāt al-fuṣḥā*). Both of these, he says, are nothing more than empty claims, with no evidence to back them up.

Others, he says, say that the word 'seven' is not intended to indicate an exact number but, rather, indicates breadth and ease and that there is nothing wrong in people reciting the Qurʾān in any dialect of Arabic since God has given them permission to do so. The Arabs use numbers like 7, 70 and 700 not necessarily intending the exact number but, rather, referring to a large number and/or to express exaggeration without specifying an exact amount. God says, for example, 'like a seed which produces seven stalks' (Q. 2. 261), and 'even if you were to ask forgiveness for them seventy times' (Q. 9. 80); and the Prophet said, when speaking about the reward for a good action, 'up to seven hundred times that and many times more'.[88]

This, he says, would be good except for the counter-evidence in the *ḥadīth* literature to the effect that when Jibrīl brought the Qurʾān according to one *ḥarf*, Mīkāʾīl told him to ask for more. So the Prophet asked God to make things easy for his community, and Jibrīl brought him two *ḥarf*s. Then Mīkāʾīl told him to ask for more, and he asked God to make things easy for his community, and Jibrīl brought him three

[87] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 25.

[88] See, for example, al-Nawawī, *An-Nawawī's Forty Hadith* [= *Matn al-arbaʿīn al-Nawawiyya*] (transl. Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies; Damascus: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 3rd edn., 1977), 116–17 (*ḥadīth* no. 37).

*ḥarf*s; and so on until he had been given seven. But in Abū Bakra's transmission it says, 'I looked at Mīkāʾīl and he kept quiet, and so I knew that the number had come to an end', which indicates that the word is being used for a specific number rather than a general amount.[89]

I say: It is still permissible to take the number 'seven' as being general, i.e. indicating multiplicity on a limited level, rather than specific, i.e. indicating exactly seven, if one allows that the reason for stopping at seven, rather than say six or eight, is precisely because seven indicates this limited multiplicity in a way that any other small number does not. In other words, the upshot of the *ḥadīth* is still that there is a 'seven-level'—rather than a 'seventy-level' or 'seven-hundred-level'— amount of variability that is being permitted.

Having excluded the majority opinion of the 'seven dialects' thesis, and the minority opinion of the 'seven categories of content' explanation, Ibn al-Jazarī goes on to suggest his own understanding of the matter. He says:

I have thought about the problematic nature of this *ḥadīth* for some thirty years or so until God showed me what I hope is the correct understanding of it. I have considered all the different readings—whether authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*), irregular (*shādhdh*), weak (*ḍaʿīf*) or rejected (*munkar*)—and the differences between them can be categorized under seven types of variation which include them all.

He then lists them in the following way:

1. Short-vowel variations, with no change to the skeleton of the word or its meaning, e.g. *al-bukhl*, *al-bakhal*, *al-bukhul* and *al-bakhl* (Q. 4. 37, 57. 24),[90] *yaḥsibu* and *yaḥsabu* (Q. 2. 273, etc).[91]
2. Short-vowel variations with no change to the skeleton but with a change to the meaning, e.g. *fa-talaqqā Ādamu min rabbihi kalimātin / fa-talaqqā Ādama min rabbihi kalimātun* (Q. 2. 37)[92] and *wa-ddakara baʿda ummatin / immatin / amahin / amhin* (Q. 12. 45).[93]
3. Differences in [the dotting of] consonants with no change to the skeleton but with a change to the meaning, e.g. *tablū / tatlū* (Q. 10. 30),[94] *nunajjīka / nunaḥḥīka bi-badanika / bi-nidāʾika* (Q. 10. 92).[95]

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[89] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 26.
[90] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 233, 627; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 179, 430; Ibn Khālawayhi, *Mukhtaṣar*, 26; *Muʿjam*, ii. 133.
[91] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 191; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 154.
[92] See, for example, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 154; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 129.
[93] See, for example, *Muʿjam*, iii. 172–3; al-Bannāʾ, *Itḥāf*, 265; Ibn Khālawayhi, *Mukhtaṣar*, 64.
[94] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 325; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 233.
[95] *Muʿjam*, iii. 91–2. Cf. Ibn Khālawayhi, *Mukhtaṣar*, 58.

4. Differences in the skeleton but with no change to the meaning, e.g. *basṭa / basṭa* (Q. 2. 247, 7. 69),[96] *al-ṣirāṭ / al-sirāṭ* (Q. 1. 6).[97]

5. Differences in both the skeleton and the meaning, e.g. *ashadda minkum / minhum* ('stronger than you / than them'; Q. 40. 21 only),[98] *wa-lā yaʾtali / yataʾalla* ('Do not let...fall short / make oaths'; Q. 24. 22),[99] *fa-sʿaw / fa-mḍū ilā dhikri llāh* ('Go to the remembrance of Allah'; Q. 62. 9) (see above).

6. Differences in the word order, e.g. *fa-yaqtulūna wa-yuqtalūna / fa-yuqtalūna wa-yaqtulūna* ('they will kill and be killed / they will be killed and kill') (Q. 9. 111);[100] *wa-jāʾat sakratu l-mawti bi-l-ḥaqq / wa-jāʾat sakratu l-ḥaqqi bi-l-mawt* ('and the agony of death will come in truth / and the agony of truth will come with death') (Q. 50. 19) (see above).

7. Differences involving the addition or omission of a letter or letters, e.g. *wa-awṣā / wa-waṣṣā* (Q. 2. 132),[101] *wa-mā khalaqa l-dhakara wa-l-unthā / wa-l-dhakari wa-l-unthā* (Q. 92. 3) (see above).

These, he says, form seven types of variant which encompass all of those recorded. There are also, of course, phonetic differences to do with details of pronunciation, such as *iẓhār* (full articulation) and *idghām* (assimilation), *rawm* (slurred or incomplete pronunciation of a vowel) and *ishmām* (articulation of a vowel, particularly a *ḍamma*, without any accompanying sound),[102] *tafkhīm* (the velarized pronunciation of certain consonants, particularly, in this context, of *lām* in the vicinity of *ṣād*, *ṭāʾ* and *ẓāʾ*, resulting in a back-vowel quality to a following *a* or *ā*) and *tarqīq* (the non-velarized pronunciation of certain consonants, particularly, in this context, of *rāʾ* after a preceding *i*, *ī* or *ay*, resulting in the 'ordinary', fronted, pronunciation of a following *a* or *ā*),[103] *madd* and

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[96] See, for example, al-Dānī, *Muqniʿ*, 89.

[97] See, for example, ibid, 95; also, for different possible pronunciations, Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 105–8.

[98] Ibid, 569; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 389.

[99] See, for example, *Muʿjam*, iv. 242; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 317 ('and they say it is spelled in the first *muṣḥaf* as *yāʾ - tāʾ - lām*'); al-Bannāʾ, *Itḥāf*, 323 (*yataʾalla*: Abū Jaʿfar and al-Ḥasan). For the two possible meanings of *yaʾtali* as either 'fall short' or, like *yataʾalla*, 'make an oath', see, for example, Ibn Jinnī, *Muḥtasab*, ii. 149; Ibn ʿAṭiyya, *Tafsīr*, xi. 286.

[100] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 319; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 230.

[101] Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 171; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 137.

[102] For fuller definitions of *rawm* and *ishmām*, and the overlap between the two terms, see, for example, Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, ii. 121.

[103] For an extensive treatment of *tarqīq al-rāʾāt* and *tafkhīm / taghlīz al-lāmāt*, particularly in the context of the reading of Warsh from Nāfiʿ, see, for example, Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, ii. 90–119.

qaṣr (i.e. whether or not there is extra lengthening of long vowels either preceding or following a *hamza*), *imāla* (i.e. pronouncing *a* or *ā* with a markedly fronted quality) and *fatḥ* (pronouncing *a* or *ā* with their 'ordinary' values), and whether *hamza*s are pronounced fully (*taḥqīq*), or effectively as a vowel-glide (*tashīl* and *ibdāl*), or are subject to complete elision (*naql*). None of these features, however, involves any change to a word or its meaning, since the word, when pronounced in any of these ways, is still the same word. If they do need to be included in the above seven-way categorization, they would come, he says, under the first category, i.e. differences in short vowels with no change to either the skeleton of the word or its meaning.

In other words, Ibn al-Jazarī is saying that the seven *aḥruf* indicate seven types of linguistic variation, or we could say seven ways of modifying speech, within the single framework of one language (the dialect of Quryash) and while maintaining one meaning.

He then mentions that he subsequently found that other scholars had attempted similar categorizations, and he mentions those of al-Rāzī and Ibn Qutayba in particular, which involve broadly similar categorizations of variants, and which we leave out here for reasons of space.[104]

However, although this is a neat and accurate description of the variants involved, it does not seem to me that it is the best explanation of the seven *aḥruf* as expressed in the above *ḥadīth*s. Rather, what seems a better explanation is suggested by the eighth issue that Ibn al-Jazarī chooses to discuss, which is whether or not all seven *ḥarf*s are contained in ʿUthmān's *muṣḥaf*.

ARE ALL SEVEN *ḤARF*S CONTAINED IN ʿʿUTHMĀN'S *MUṢḤAF*'?

This eighth issue of Ibn al-Jazarī is perhaps the one most pertinent to our inquiry. He himself indicates its importance by saying, 'Whether the ʿUthmānī *muṣḥaf*s contain all the seven *aḥruf* is a major issue (*masʾala kabīra*) about which the *ʿulamā* have different opinions.' Put differently, the question is, if not all the seven *aḥruf* are there in the Qurʾān, does that mean that some of the Qurʾān is missing and hasn't been preserved? There are basically, he says, two views on the matter:

Some people among the *fuqahāʾ*, the Qurʾān readers and the scholastic theologians (*mutakallimūn*) hold that the ʿUthmānī *muṣḥaf*s contain all of the

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[104] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 25–7.

seven *aḥruf*. They base this on the understanding that it is not permissible for the community to have neglected the transmission of any of the seven *aḥruf* according to which the Qurʾān was revealed. The Companions agreed on transmitting the ʿUthmānī *muṣḥaf*s from the pages which Abū Bakr and ʿUmar had written down, and on sending each of these *muṣḥaf*s to one of the main urban centres (*amṣār*) of the Muslims. They also agreed on leaving aside anything else. These people say that it is not conceivable (*lā yajūz*) that people should have been forbidden to recite any of the seven *aḥruf* nor that there should have been agreement to leave aside any of the Qurʾān.

But this group, Ibn al-Jazarī notes, is only a small minority. As for the majority, they hold a different opinion:

The majority (*jamāhīr*) of both earlier and later scholars, and the imāms of the Muslims, are of the opinion that the ʿUthmānī *muṣḥaf*s only contain out of the seven *aḥruf* what the skeletal text (*rasm*) can support, although they include all of the 'last rendition' (*al-ʿarḍa al-akhīra*) as rendered by the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, to Gabriel, without leaving out any *ḥarf* from [that rendition]. This opinion is the one that appears to me to be correct, because of the authentic *ḥadīth*s and well-known, widespread reports that indicate it and bear witness to it.[105]

He goes on to point out that various responses have been made to the objections of the first group, among them that of Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī 'and others', who say:

It was not obligatory for the community to recite according to all seven *aḥruf*; rather, that was something that was permitted to them as an allowance, and they were allowed to choose whichever *ḥarf* they wished to recite, as is mentioned in various authentic *ḥadīth*s. When the Companions saw how the community would become divided by dispute and would end up fighting one another if they didn't come to an agreement to use one *ḥarf*, they overwhelmingly agreed on this, and they are a people who are free from agreeing on an error. This did not involve disregarding any obligation or doing anything prohibited. Some people say that the allowance to recite according to seven *aḥruf* was valid at the beginning of Islam, because of the difficulty involved in having to recite only according to one *ḥarf*; but then, once people's tongues had become accustomed to reciting [the Qurʾān] and agreement on one *ḥarf* was easy for them and more appropriate for [their situation], they agreed to use the *ḥarf* that was used in the 'last rendition'. Some people [also] say that the 'last rendition' abrogated

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[105] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 31. For this 'majority' view, see also, for example, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Tamhīd*, viii. 291, 293, 296 and 300, and al-Ṭabarī's view below (pp. 35–6).

everything else, which is why many of the *ʿulamāʾ* state that the variants which are recorded from some of the Companions, such as Ubayy, Ibn Masʿūd and others, and which are different from what is included in the ʿUthmānī *muṣḥaf*s, have been abrogated.[106]

It is thus clear that Ibn al-Jazarī's main argument is, firstly, that the seven *aḥruf* must relate to form and not content; secondly, that this variation in form cannot be considered dialectal but manifests, rather, within one form, or we could say one dialect, of Arabic (effectively, the highest register of the 'dialect' of Quraysh); thirdly, this degree of variation on the level of form was allowed in the earliest period but was then restricted somewhat in the time of ʿUthmān in a way that was (a) permissible, and (b) did not result in any of the content of the Qurʾān being lost. The Qurʾān is thus complete, but only preserves of the variations formerly allowed in the time before the agreement on one skeletal text 'that of the seven *ḥarf*s that it can contain', while containing at least one of those *ḥarf*s in its totality.

THE 'SEVEN *AḤRUF*' AND THE 'ORAL-FORMULAIC' THEORY

What, then, should we make of all this if we want to understand the form of the Qurʾān, and how a book from one source can manifest with so many differences on the level of detail? In other words, how can we tie in these differences with the theological position that there is only one Qurʾān which has never changed and will never change, which is frequently linked to the *āya* 'Innā naḥnu nazzalnā l-dhikra wa-innā la-hu la-ḥāfiẓūna' ('It is We who sent down the Reminder and We who will preserve it'; Q. 15. 9)?[107]

What I believe is likely to be the answer, or at least a major part of it, has been suggested before but not, to the best of my knowledge, ever fully considered with respect to the Qurʾān. Alan Jones, in his article on

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[106] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 31–2.

[107] See, for example, al-Ṣāwī, *Ḥāshiyat al-Ṣāwī ʿalā tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 4 vols., n.d; originally Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1358 [1939]), ii. 293, under Q. 15. 9, where the phrase *la-ḥāfiẓūna* is glossed by the words *min al-tabdīl wa-l-taḥrīf wa-l-ziyāda wa-l-nuqṣān* ('from any change, alteration, addition or omission').

the Qurʾān in the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, hints at it when he says, referring to variants based on synonyms:

Such variants are, of course, frequently found in oral tradition or material based on oral tradition. Typical examples are Ibn Masʿūd's *arshidnā* for *ihdinā* in *sūrah* i.6 and Ubayy's *bisāṭ* for *firāsh* in ii. 22. Many Muslim scholars dismiss such variants as glosses, but this is far too naïve an assessment.[108]

Whatever else we might say, it does seem clear that many Muslim scholars have indeed, for various reasons, accepted a fairly limited understanding of the various readings—especially those that are *shādhdh*—recorded in the sources, and have not taken into account the different expectations and realities of a primarily 'oral', rather than 'literate', society.[109]

[108] Alan Jones, 'The Qurʾān—II' in (eds.) A. F. L. Beeston *et al.*, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Arabic Literature to the End of the Abbasid Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 228–45, at 239. For *arshidnā*, see, for example, *Muʿjam*, i. 11; also Ibn Khālawayhi, *Mukhtaṣar*, 1. For *bisāṭ*, see, for example, *Muʿjam*, i. 37 (where this reading is attributed to 'Yazīd al-Shāmī', to be identified, presumably, with Yazīd ibn Quṭayb al-Shāmī [for whom, see Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāya*, ii. 382]).

[109] The following examples, taken from the literature available in English, seem representative: (i) 'So far as the compilation of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is concerned, it should be remembered that he did not prepare it as a comprehensive and standard text of the Qurʾān. He, in fact, compiled it as an aid to his memory. He recorded some of the verses which he thought would slip out of his memory and it was a common practice with him to note down their explanations also.' (Abdul Ḥamīd Ṣiddīqī, translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* [Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1976], ii. 394, n. 1103); (ii) 'Assuming that all these are reliable reports, the copy of Ibn Masʿūd would then have been prepared for his personal use and written before all 114 *sūrāt* were revealed'; and '[the *muṣḥaf* of Ubayy] was a *muṣḥaf* for his own personal use, in other words, his private notebook, where he did not always distinguish between Qurʾānic material and *ḥadīth*, since it was not meant for general use and he himself knew well what to make of his own words. The same is true for the other copies of the Qurʾān which some of the Companions had for their own personal use.' (Ahmad von Denffer, *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qurʾān* [Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1403/1983], 48 and 49, n. 41); (iii) 'Most of his evidence [i.e. that of Arthur Jeffery, in his *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 1937)] simply states that Ibn Masʿūd recited this verse in that way with no proof or chains of narration; it is nothing more than gossip, pure hearsay, and to elevate it from its low character and use it as an argument against well-proven recitations, is to refuse the distinction between a narrator's honesty and falsehood'; 'some scholars proffered explanatory notes to their listeners during the course of recitation'; and 'A cursory glance at [Jeffery's]

The well known work by Albert Lord (following Milman Parry) on 'oral-formulaic' poetry among twentieth-century Yugoslavian poets and its relation to the Homeric epics, to which Jones' comment above is presumably a reference, has enabled us to reconsider the standard form of so-called 'oral literature' and what happens when it is reduced to writing.[110] One of their main conclusions is that there is a fundamental difference in form between oral and written literature: oral literature is typically 'multiform' (rather than 'uniform'), that is, what is understood by the singer or poet to be the same song or poem may be performed on different occasions with considerable minor changes, especially of the formulaic expressions of which such literature is full, although the 'story-line' remains the same, as does the overall form, and the singer may insist that he is singing exactly the same song or reciting exactly the

sources yields two objections straightaway. First, because they never state that Ibn Masʿūd was reading from a written copy we can just as easily assume that he was overheard reciting from memory, and how can we confidently deduce that the erroneous readings were not due to a memory slip? Second..., the vast majority of Jeffery's references contain no *isnād* whatsoever, making them inadmissible because they offer nothing but empty gossip.' (M. M. Al-Azami, *The History of the Qurʾānic Text from Revelation to Compilation* [Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003], 160, 163 and 195). A more nuanced appreciation is offered by Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, who notes, with regard to *shādhdh qirāʾāt*, that 'These *qira'aat* have an authentic chain of narration back to the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, and conform to Arabic grammar, but do not match the *mus-hafs* of 'Uthmaan. In addition, they are not *mutawaatir*. In other words, they employ words or phrases that the 'Uthmaanic *mus-hafs* do not allow. Most of the time (but not all...), this type of *qira'aat* was in fact used by the Companions as explanations to certain verses in the Qur'aan [...] Another explanation for this type of *qira'aat* is that they were part of the *ahruf* that were revealed to the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, but later abrogated, and thus not preserved in the *mus-haf* of 'Uthmaan', and 'those recitations that are shown to be authentic but are not a part of the *qira'aat*, such as Ibn Mas'ood's reading of '*ihdina*' as '*arshidna*', are only examples of the *ahruf* of the Qur'aan that were not preserved by the command of the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*.' (Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan* [Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1420/1999], 192 and 387).

[110] For a convenient overview of the 'oral-formulaic' theory and the ever-burgeoning literature that it has engendered, see, for example, John Miles Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); also, for a wide-ranging and insightful presentation of the main issues involved, Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [first published in 1982 by Methuen & Co. Ltd]).

same poem.[111] In other words, there is a known message, and a known form, but each re-production of it is a fresh one which is not necessarily bound by the one before—until, that is, it is reduced to writing and the pressure builds to conform to the newly written form. But this approach is, of course, very different to that of people used to the fixed outlines of a written text (among whom we must include almost all scholars of the Qur'ān, whether in the past or the present, and whether Muslim or otherwise). As Lord notes:

Our real difficulty arises from the fact that, unlike the oral poet, we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of fluidity. We find it difficult to grasp something that is multiform. It seems to us necessary to construct an ideal text or to seek an original, and we remain dissatisfied with an everchanging phenomenon. I believe that once we know the facts of oral composition we must cease trying to find an original of any traditional song.[112]

Lord goes on to say:

The truth of the matter is that our concept of 'the original', of 'the song', simply makes no sense in oral tradition. To us it seems so basic, so logical, since we are brought up in a society in which writing has fixed the norm of a stable first creation in art, that we feel there must be an 'original' for everything. The first singing in oral tradition does not coincide with this concept of the 'original'. We might as well be prepared to face the fact that we are in a different world of thought, the patterns of which do not always fit our cherished terms. In oral tradition the idea of an original is illogical.

It follows, then, that we cannot correctly speak of a 'variant', since there is no 'original' to be varied! Yet songs are related to one another in varying degrees; not, however, in the relationship of variant to original, in spite of the recourse so often made to an erroneous concept of 'oral transmission'; for 'oral transmission', 'oral composition', 'oral creation', and 'oral performance' are all one and

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[111] See, for example, Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 26–29; also Michael Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1978), 18, where the author states, referring to Lord's *Singer of Tales*: '. . . the oral poet *and* his public, as Lord has indicated, ordinarily conceive of his performance-*cum*-composition—of rendition—as a re-creation of a pre-existent song from memory; and the poet himself would emphatically claim that his presentation of a poem is a verbatim 'recitation' of it as he heard it or performed it before.'

[112] Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 100.

the same thing. Our greatest error is to make 'scientifically' rigid a phenomenon that is fluid.[113]

Now the Qur'ān is not poetry, nor can we talk about it as the 'composition' or 'creation' of an individual poet or singer. It is, nevertheless, very much first and foremost an oral phenomenon which first manifested in a society in which such 'oral transmission', 'oral composition', 'oral creation', and 'oral performance' of poetry was very much the norm.[114] So we can expect it to have been experienced, in a cultural sense, rather in the same way that poetry was at that time; meaning, that a limited amount of 'variation' was not only accepted but also expected, if it was even noticed; it was, in a sense, built in to the very text. This, I would suggest, is what we in fact find in the traditional accounts of the early history of the Qur'ān and of the different 'readings', and especially the famous ḥadīths about the seven aḥruf recorded in all the main collections. It might seem an obvious point, but the Qur'ān is exactly what it says it is: a qur'ān, or recitation, that is, an oral phenomenon. And though we can, and must, talk about the Qur'ān as the Book (kitāb) of God, this does not detract from its primary qur'ān-ness, and thus oral nature, in its manifestation on the tongue of the Messenger. (For the differences between qur'ān and kitāb, see further below.)

If this supposition is correct—that the variant readings are predominantly an expression of the Qur'ān's oral, and thus 'multiform', nature—then it immediately becomes apparent that any attempt to try to arrive at an 'original' Qur'ān in the sense of one, fixed text is an

[113] Ibid, 101.
[114] For a positive application of the Parry/Lord theory to early Arabic poetry, see J. Monroe, 'Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 3 (1972): 1–53; Zwettler, *Oral Tradition*. Zwettler's (and Monroe's) conclusions have been questioned by, amongst others, Gregor Schoeler (see Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, esp. ch. 4, 87–110) but, to my mind, Schoeler's criticisms miss the main point of what one might call 'intrinsic multiformity'—in both initial presentation (what Schoeler calls 'composition') and subsequent transmission—as the best explanation of the large number of Qur'ānic 'variants' noted in the literature. Indeed, Schoeler himself acknowledges that '[i]n the transmission of ancient Arabic poetry, the varying and flexible character of a poem's text was not only tolerated but was normal and sometimes even welcomed' (Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 76; see also id., *Genesis*, 32) and also speaks of the 'variations so common to the oral mode of transmission' (108). It is this flexibility—or a fair degree of it—that we are arguing is part of the seven aḥruf nature of the recited form of the Qur'ān in both its initial delivery by the Prophet and its onward transmission by the Companions.

impossible, indeed pointless, task. We cannot, at this remove, reconstruct all of what was at one time or another recited as part of the seven *aḥruf* of the Qurʾān (or perhaps we should say, that was allowed to be recited as part of the seven-*aḥruf* nature of the Qurʾān). What we have, rather, is a complete edition of the Qurʾān which contains, to paraphrase Ibn al-Jazarī again, 'that of the seven *aḥruf* that it can contain' and which, at the same time, has not left out anything of the 'last rendition'. In other words, we have a complete Qurʾān—we have every *sūra*, we have every *āya* (other than what has been abrogated, of course): we have the whole message—but a single written form can never be an exact replica of a multiform original.

What ʿUthmān accepted—and the Companions agreed with him—was that trying to maintain this 'seven-level' multiformity would lead to—had already led to—dissension and conflict. Individuals were not wrong to recite in the way they did—assuming they had Prophetic authority for it—but what was wrong was arguing over the details: *al-mirāʾ fī l-Qurʾān kufr* ('arguing about the Qurʾān is *kufr*'), as the *ḥadīth* puts it in this very context of the seven *aḥruf*.[115] And so the decision was taken to restrict this multiformity to what could be contained and preserved in one written form, and this was done for the benefit of the community. Al-Ṭabarī notes in his *Tafsīr*:

The Imām of the Muslims and the Commander of the Faithful, ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, may God have mercy on him, united the Muslims, out of his concern for them and his fear that they would leave Islam and fall into *kufr* after having been believers. This was because he had seen how some of them were denying part of the seven *aḥruf* according to which the Qurʾān had been revealed, although the Companions had heard the Messenger, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, forbid them from denying any part of [these *aḥruf*] and had told them that arguing about them was *kufr*. Therefore, since he saw what had become apparent in his time, despite their being so close to the time of the revelation and this being so soon after the death of the Prophet, he got them to agree to what would preserve them from a major disaster (*ʿaẓīm al-balāʾ*) with regard to the religion by reciting the Qurʾān according to [only] one *ḥarf*. So he united them on one *muṣḥaf* and one *ḥarf* and burnt anything else other than the *muṣḥaf* that he had united them on; and he made the firm decision that anyone who had any other *muṣḥaf* that was different to the one that he had united the Muslims on should burn it.

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[115] Versions of this *ḥadīth*, all in the context of the seven *aḥruf*, are related via Abū Hurayra (Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, iii. 161–2; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i. 9; cf. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, iv. 159 [= *K. al-Sunna: b. al-nahy ʿan al-jidāl*]), Abū Juhaym (Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vi. 172–3; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i. 15) and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ (Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vi. 244).

The community trusted and obeyed him in this and was of the opinion that what he had done was right and correct, and so they stopped reciting according to the six [other] *aḥruf* which their just Imām had made the decision to leave aside, out of obedience to him and seeing the benefit in that for themselves and for those who would come after them. After this, knowledge of these [*aḥruf*] was lost among the community and record of them disappeared. Nowadays there is no way that anyone can recite [any of] them because there is no longer any record of them. The Muslims have continued to refuse to use them in recitation without denying their authenticity in any way, because of the benefit in that for themselves and for the rest of the Muslims. Today the Muslims only recite according to the one *ḥarf* that their Imām chose for them, out of his concern and desire to do what was right for them, and have left aside the other six *aḥruf*. If someone with insufficient knowledge were to say, 'How is it possible that they could have left aside a way of reciting which they had been taught directly by the Prophet, *ṣallā l-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*, and which he had told them to use?', we would say that this was not an obligatory command but one of permission and allowance. If it had been an obligatory command then there would have been people who would have maintained knowledge of all of these seven *ḥarf*s so that the community would have had no doubt about its obligations in this respect. The fact that they did not maintain this knowledge is the best proof that they were free to choose from among these seven *aḥruf* and were not obliged to preserve them all. Rather, their most important obligation was to protect Islam and its people.[116]

Al-Ṭabarī's view is perhaps not exactly the same as Ibn al-Jazarī's, as he assumes that only one *ḥarf* out of seven has survived, whereas Ibn al-Jazarī allows that there may be more than just one *ḥarf* represented in the ʿUthmānī *muṣḥaf*s, but the upshot is the same, namely, that the seven *aḥruf* in which the Qurʾān originally manifested included a degree of variation that is no longer possible.

Sīdī ʿAbdallāh al-Shinqīṭī, in his *Nashr al-bunūd ʿalā Marāqī al-suʿūd*, notes that both writing down the Qurʾān and vocalizing it are examples of the principle of *al-maṣāliḥ al-mursala*, i.e. things that are done for the benefit of the community without there being a clear text saying that one should or should not do them. The first, he says, was done in order to preserve the Qurʾān from being forgotten, and the second in order to preserve it from any corruption. 'Another example', he says, 'is ʿUthmān's burning the *maṣāḥif* and uniting the people on one *muṣḥaf* in order to prevent conflict.'[117]

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[116] al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i. 22.
[117] Sīdī ʿAbdallāh ibn Ibrāhīm al-ʿAlawī al-Shinqīṭī, *Nashr al-bunūd ʿalā Marāqī al-suʿūd* (Mohammedia: Ṣundūq Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 2 vols., n.d.), ii. 190.

Thus not only is any reconstruction of 'the Qur'ān' with all its originally permitted level of detail impossible for technical reasons—we do not have accurate records of everything that might have been 'of the Qur'ān' (*min al-qur'ān*), as the *ḥadīth* about 'Uthmān's directive expresses it;[118] it would also, from a Muslim point of view, be an act of disobedience, even if it were possible, because of 'Uthmān's pronouncement and the agreement (*ijmā'*) of the community to follow it. 'Uthmān ordered all other copies, or fragments, 'of the Qur'ān' (*mā siwāhu min al-Qur'ān*) to be destroyed, whether by being burnt (*ḥarq*), or torn up (*kharq*), or simply having the writing effaced (*maḥw*) or washed off (*ghasl*).[119] Even Ḥafṣa's 'pages' (*ṣuḥuf*)—which she had inherited from her father 'Umar who had inherited them from Abū Bakr—were only given back to her because she had allowed them to be used only on the condition that they were to be returned to her as they were. However, as soon as she died, Marwān, the then governor of Madina, ordered that they, too, be destroyed, in accordance with 'Uthmān's caliphal edict and out of fear that they contained differences in the written form.[120]

In this context we recall Mālik's judgement that the political authorities should enforce a ban on copying or selling a *muṣḥaf* according to the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd, quite apart from it being prohibited to recite it during the prayer. Later on, of course, Ibn Mujāhid—in addition to his establishing Seven Readings—was to publicly ban any attempt to allow leeway with regard to the 'Uthmānic *rasm*, as in the cases of Ibn Shanabūdh (d. 328/939),[121]

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[118] See, for example, al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vi. 99 [*K. Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān: b. jam' al-Qur'ān*].

[119] See previous note; also Anon., *Kitāb al-Mabānī* in Arthur Jeffery (ed.), *Two Muqaddimas to the Qur'ānic Sciences* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānijī, 1954), 19, 22.

[120] See, for example, Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, iii. 1003–4; Ibn Rushd [al-Jadd], *Bayān*, xvii. 36; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Tamhīd*, viii. 300. One report in Ibn Shabba's *Tārīkh al-Madīna* suggests that these pages did not differ at all (*fī shay'*) from the 'standard' text prepared by Zayd for 'Uthmān, but (a) the context of the report suggests that this lack of difference is best understood in terms of the inclusion or exclusion of certain verses, i.e. differences on the macro-level, rather than on the micro-level of individual words or letters, and (b) the same source makes it clear that Marwān did what he did because he was afraid that these pages did include differences in the written form (Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, iii. 1002–4).

[121] This is the pronunciation that was specified to me by Shaykh Ayman Rushdī Suwayd, an expert in the Ten Readings.

who held that it was permissible to recite using the *shādhdh* readings recorded from the Companions (such as *fa-mḍū ilā dhikri l-lāh* and other similar readings, as illustrated above), and Ibn Miqsam (d. 354/965), who effectively allowed readings based on the *rasm* of the *muṣḥaf*, but without any chain of authority (*sanad*), as long as they were in good Arabic.[122]

The above also suggests that we need to distinguish between *kitāb*, *qurʾān* and *muṣḥaf*, which we can see as three aspects of the same thing. *Kitāb*, we would say, is the divinely-preserved 'original', which, as God's speech (*kalām*) and therefore one of the divine attributes, is, strictly speaking, indefinable in human terms.[123] In a sense it belongs to a different realm: it is 'that book' (*dhālika l-kitāb*; Q. 2. 2) rather than 'this Qurʾān' (*hādhā al-qurʾān*; e.g. Q. 6. 19, 10. 37, etc). It is, as the Qurʾān says, a book that has been sent down in the form of a *qurʾān* in the Arabic language (*kitābun fuṣṣilat āyātuhu qurʾānan ʿarabiyyan* ['a book whose *āyas* ('signs', 'verses') have been demarcated (or 'clarified') in the form of an Arabic Qurʾān'] Q. 41. 3) so that it can be understood by people.[124] One could say that it is from the out-of-time and comes into

[122] See, for example, Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāya*, ii. 54–5 (Ibn Shanabūdh) and 124 (Ibn Miqsam); also, for recent coverage of this topic: Melchert, 'Ibn Mujāhid', 20–21; Mustafa Shah, 'The Early Arabic Grammarians' Contributions to the Collection and Authentication of Qurʾanic Readings: The Prelude to Ibn Mujāhid's *Kitāb al-Sabʿa*', *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies*, 6/1 (2004): 72–102, esp. 73–85; Rabb, 'Non-Canonical Readings', 104.

[123] It is beyond the scope of the present article to investigate the relationship between *kalām* and *kitāb* in this particular context. We would, however, like to draw attention to Madigan's insights on the topic in his *The Qurʾân's Self-Image*, where he notes, for example, that 'Although identified as *kitâb Allâh*, the Qurʾân, because of its orality and the sense of its immediacy to God, has always had the status of God's speech (*kalâm*) in Islamic tradition.... In fact, it is probably due to the proximity of *kitâb Allâh* to *kalâm Allâh* in the Qurʾanic worldview that the former virtually disappeared from Muslim theological discourse.... *Kalâm Allâh* has all but taken over from *kitâb Allâh* as the key term for expressing faith in the divine origin and authority of the Qurʾân text.... The preference the tradition shows for *kalâm* over *kitâb* as the primary way to understand the Qurʾân may reflect a sense that the particular way *kitâb* is used in the Qurʾân has more in common with active speech than with finished writing' (Daniel Madigan, *The Qurʾân's Self-Image* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 185–6).

[124] I notice that Madigan and Jones, seemingly independently of each other, have both arrived at a broadly similar distinction between *qurʾān* and *kitāb*. See, for example, Madigan, *The Qurʾân's Self-Image*, esp. pp. 76–77: 'Based on these observations it appears that *kitâb* functions in the Qurʾân's discourse primarily as a symbol, rather than as a concrete entity. As a symbol it is multivalent and able

the in-time on the heart, and then the tongue, of the Messenger: 'The Trustworthy Spirit brought it down onto your heart for you to be one of the warners, in a clear Arabic tongue' (Q. 26. 193–5). But in doing so it takes on some of the characteristics of ordinary human speech: it is in

to operate on several levels at the same time—something that has always frustrated those who have sought to specify it.... [I]t is the primary symbol of God's sovereignty and knowledge. The *kitâb* given to the Messenger, and through him to the people, is not (*pace* Pedersen) the record of God's wisdom and judgment, but rather the point where that timeless authority and insight address the time-bound human condition. The *umm al-kitâb* 'the source (lit., mother) of the *kitâb*' is not just some larger, primordial book from which each of the scriptures derived; it is the very essence of God's universal knowledge and authoritative will. To have been given the *kitâb* is to have been given some access to that divine realm where everything is 'written', that is, known and determined. To say that a people has been given the *kitâb* is not to say they have been vouchsafed some great work of reference that contains all they need to know and act upon; rather it means that they have entered into a new mode of existence, where the community lives in the assurance and expectation (or perhaps even the fear) of being personally addressed by the divine authority and knowledge. For all the attempts to specify it and reduce it to manageable proportions, the Qur'ân's *kitâb* still insists on seeing itself as the potent symbol and authoritative locus of divine address to the world through the Arabian prophet in the language of the Arabs.' See also Alan Jones, 'Orality and Writing in Arabia', *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), iii. esp. pp. 592–3: 'On the basis of these and similar passages, particularly with the phrase *kitāb mubīn* [...], one can make a good case for arguing that 'divine message' would give a clearer indication of the meaning of *kitāb* than 'scripture' does. God does not transmit the divine message to his messengers in writing. The use of the verb *awḥā*, 'suggest, inspire', is perhaps the clearest indication of that.... It is not fanciful to think that this priority of the oral over the written would have influenced the believers in one direction, while a very natural desire to have written copies would have pulled them in the opposite way.... Although the Qur'ān reflects a prejudice for an oral—as opposed to a written—preservation of scripture, papyri from the early Islamic period show a highly developed script. This evidence, together with material found in the *sīra*—and even the Qur'ān itself—lend support to a theory of pre-Islamic development of Arabic script with diacritics. These two trends (oral preservation of culture, but the utilization of writing in mundane matters) indicate a two-fold development of the Arabic script: one (Kūfic, mentioned above) that served as a memory aid in the preservation of orally-transmitted culture and scripture, and a more differentiated one used in the transactions of daily life.' The same general argument is also presented by Jones in his 'The Word Made Visible: Arabic Script and the Committing of the Qur'ān to Writing' in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D. S. Richards* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 1–16.

their language—albeit a particularly high register of it—and it uses a
diction and a vocabulary that they are, except perhaps for a few words,
familiar with and which they recognize as being the same as the
vocabulary and the grammar of the poetry that they are used to. But,
although it shares these linguistic features with poetry, it does not share
the same form: there is no regular metre accompanied by rhyme. The
message also is very different, and is accompanied by action and
behaviour of a very elevated quality in the one who delivers it.

Soon after the Qurʾān begins to be revealed it also begins to be written
down—to what extent we do not know, but our sources mention written
versions of parts of the Qurʾān in the early Makkan period, such as the
page or document (ṣaḥīfa) that ʿUmar found with his sister that had Sūra
Ṭāhā written on it.[125] (At the same time, our sources tell us that the
decision to 'collect' the Qurʾān in the time of Abu Bakr was taken out of
concern that 'much of the Qurʾān' (kathīr min al-Qurʾān) would
otherwise be lost through the death in battle of those who knew it, thus
implying that much of it was in their memory rather than in written
form, which is also borne out by the fact that one of the sources for this
collection was indeed 'the hearts of men' (ṣudūr al-rijāl).)[126] But, in
transferring a multiform, oral qurʾān into a written form, there is a
problem: more than one form (ḥarf) cannot be indicated in writing at the
same time—at least, not with any great degree of success. Nor should we
expect this newly written form to be in any way definitive: during the
lifetime of the Prophet it could, of course, be subject to change and/or
re-presentation, and even abrogation. In fact, we may assume that it
acted primarily as an aide-mémoire, since the main form was always the
recited word, taught and learnt as such. And, just as the 'original' recited
qurʾān could be read in several ways—within the limits of its seven
aḥruf—it seems reasonable to assume that the same would have been
true of any written representation, provided that the meaning stayed the
same and that any spoken expression of it was within the limits
demonstrated and/or accepted by the Prophet, that is, within the limits of
its seven aḥruf.[127] In other words, just as multiformity is part and parcel

[125] See Ibn Hishām, al-Sīra al-nabawiyya (ed. Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raʾūf Saʿd; Cairo:
Maktabat al-Kulliyyāt al-Azhariyya, 3rd edn., 4 vols., 1398/1978), i. 295–6 [=
Alfred Guillaume (transl.), The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's
Sirat Rasul Allah (Karachi/Oxford/New York/Delhi: Oxford University Press,
1978 [1955]), 156–7].

[126] See, for example, al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, vi. 98 [= K. Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān: b. jamʿ
al-Qurʾān].

[127] Compare Ingrid Mattson, The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place
in Muslim Life (Malden, MA/Oxford/Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2008),

of any repeated oral production, so too can it be part of any oral production based on a written form of an originally oral production. (In this context, one notes Foley's reference, in the context of Homer, to 'the challenge of distinguishing among orally composed poetry, oral performances of written materials, and the myriad different forms that originate in (some kind of) orality but reach us only as textual records'.)[128] How else are we to understand readings such as *fa-tathabbatū* alongside *fa-tabayyanū*, or *yanshurukum* alongside *yusayyirukum*, or *idhā dabara* alongside *idh adbara*, which seem to be closely linked to a/the written form? We note also that the production of a written form also necessitates decisions about the spelling (*alif* or no *alif*, etc.), the choice of words (*fa-mḍū* / *fa-s'aw*, etc.), and other matters of general presentation, including the order of the *sūras*, the indication of *sūra* and verse divisions, and the positioning and status of the *basmala*, etc.

At the death of the Prophet, the open-endedness of the revelation ceases, but the seven-level multiformity of the Qur'ān at first lives on. To prevent possible slippage, we hear of the collection of Abū Bakr's *ṣuḥuf*, but they seem never to have been definitive. Indeed, from their later history (see above) we must assume that their written form was not identical on the level of every detail with that later promulgated by 'Uthmān, though what sort of differences there were we can only guess at.

For another twenty years or so the situation must have remained roughly the same, with the variety on the level of detail that is suggested by the seven *aḥruf ḥadīth* and the other reports noted above. But then dispute about differences in reading set in—and our sources pre-suppose substantive differences, not just differences of pronunciation or 'dialect'—and in order to prevent the greater harm of conflict and dissension among the community, the decision was taken, with the agreement of the Companions, to impose a single written form on the community, only maintaining as much of the original level of variation as could be maintained given that skeletal form. But the variations that were not included—that could not be included—while not being accepted as part of the ongoing Qur'ān, were not denied either, as al-Ṭabarī explicitly states (see above) and as Ibn al-Jazarī indicates when he says that no

94: 'These differences in recitation, as long as they could be traced to a recitation *approved* by the Prophet Muhammad, were accepted as authentic' (emphasis added).

[128] Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, p. xiii.

scholar has ever denied the permissibility of transmitting knowledge of the various readings, including those that became *shādhdh*.[129] Indeed, this is attested to in the works not only of *qirāʾāt* scholars but also in standard and well accepted *tafsīr*s such as those of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ʿAṭiyya and al-Qurṭubī, to name but three, and in the standard collections of *ḥadīth*: Mālik, for instance, despite his banning of the use of Ibn Masʿūd's reading in the prayer or in the writing of any *muṣḥaf* (see above), nevertheless saw no harm in passing on information about such readings, as reports from him in the *Kitāb al-Targhīb* of Ibn Wahb's *Jāmiʿ*,[130] and his own practice in the *Muwaṭṭaʾ*, bear witness.

So ʿUthmān's decision was not only caliphal but also effectively one of *ijmāʿ*, consensus, i.e. the consensus of the Companions, which is why, as al-Ṭabarī points out, and as Mālik's judgements and Ibn Mujāhid's legal decisions indicate, it is an act of obedience for the Muslims to abide by it, and an opening of the door of *fitna* and conflict to do anything else. And the same remains true today.

To repeat: What we see in the seven *aḥruf ḥadīth* and the other reports mentioned above is, I would suggest, a memory of orality at least broadly similar to that found in other 'oral literature', even though we are dealing with a different genre of 'literature'. That is to say, the Qurʾān, which of course means literally 'recitation', was a typically 'multiform' phenomenon at the beginning of its life, reflected in the *ḥadīth* about the seven *aḥruf* and in the multiplicity of variants recorded from the Companions and others in the *qirāʾāt* and *tafsīr* literature, and was then 'reduced' to one dominant written form in the time of ʿUthmān. The 'Companion codices' can then be understood as reflections or memories of this initial multiform phenomenon, as indeed Mālik's comment, in the context of the seven *aḥruf*, about the Companions having their own, implicitly differing, *muṣḥaf*s, indicates.[131] In other words, what was finally stabilized as the ʿUthmānic recension can be seen as the choice of one, dominant, strand among others (although it still allowed for some fluidity when it came to the choice of certain consonants and/or vowels). Or, we could say, one option—or set of options, if we allow for the continuing variations at the level of consonant- or vowel-marking—was chosen at the expense of others, although these options had either (i) the direct authority of the Prophet behind them—in other words, he had

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[129] Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr*, i. 35.
[130] See above, n. 76, and accompanying text.
[131] See Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Tamhīd*, viii. 292; al-Wansharīsī, *Miʿyār*, xii. p. 111 (*qāla Mālik: lā arā fī ikhtilāfihim fī mithl hādhā baʾsan wa-qad kāna al-nās wa-lahum maṣāḥif*).

recited those passages in more than one way, as suggested in the seven *aḥruf ḥadīth* and the *ḥadīth* about how to recite *Sūrat al-Layl*; or (ii) they had the indirect authority of the Prophet behind them, in the sense that he had allowed others to recite, or read, them that way, as with Ibn Abī Sarḥ and the inadvertent, but accepted, substitution of one formula for another. It also seems to me possible that, in the intervening time between the death of the Prophet and ʿUthmān's decision some twenty or so years later, some Companions were reciting parts of the revelation using the same sort of variation that they had heard and witnessed the Prophet using and allowing others to use, and which they thus assumed they had ongoing Prophetic authority for. It is presumably on this basis that we hear of various Companions allowing some limited synonym variation, such as Anas allowing *aṣwabu qīlan* as opposed to *aqwamu qīlan* (see above) or Ibn Masʿūd allowing *ṭaʿām al-fājir* as opposed to *ṭaʿām al-athīm* (Q. 44. 44).[132] Together, this would explain why ʿUthmān agreed to limit the possibilities: what he ordered destroyed must have included initially valid possibilities of recitation, but ones which, it was feared, might lead to invalid additions and/or changes, and which not only might cause, but were already causing, dissension among the community. Hence we find the dominant position among the scholars of the Qurʾān that ʿUthmān's recension does not contain all the seven *aḥruf*, since the *ḥadīth* record clearly indicates that there was also other material that was 'of the Qurʾān'.

In short, it appears that an initially predominantly oral, 'multiform' (at a 'seven-level' degree of multiformity, i.e. seven *aḥruf*) text, becomes reduced to a predominantly written, and necessarily more uniform, text. That is, we see a change of emphasis from an oral to a written form, while the basic content remains exactly the same. Put differently, we could say that the *kitāb* of Allah gets expressed as *qurʾān* on the tongue of the Messenger, and then as *ṣuḥuf* and *maṣāḥif* by the pens of the Muslims—and all are aspects of one and the same thing. *Wa-l-lāhu aʿlamu bi-l-ṣawāb*.

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[132] For *aqwamu qīlan*, see above, n. 48 and accompanying text. For *ṭaʿām al-fājir*, see, for instance, Ibn Rushd [al-Jadd], *Bayān*, xviii. 419; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Tamhīd*, viii. 292; al-Wansharīsī, *Miʿyār*, xii. 111 (all three sources from Mālik); al-Shaybānī, *The Kitāb al-Āthār of Imām Abū Ḥanīfa in the Narration of Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī* (transl. Abdassamad Clarke; London: Turath Publishing, 2006), 154, report no. 274 (from Abū Ḥanīfa).

EXCURSUS: THE QUR'ĀN IN RECENT EURO-AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP

In an article entitled 'The Qur'ān in Recent Scholarship: Challenges and Desiderata', Fred Donner poses five 'fundamental and interrelated questions' about the Qur'ān which he considers need to be addressed in order to 'help us move scholarly Qur'ānic studies to the next stage'.[133] Of these, four—or parts of four—relate closely to our present enquiry. The first of his questions is:

Can the Qur'ān as we have it today be traced back to some kind of original version?

That is, was there an 'Ur-Qur'ān'...that appeared in some well-defined and restricted historical context (i.e. a particular place and time), a 'closed' text that stood as a precursor to today's Qur'ān? That there was such an 'Ur-Qur'ān' is, of course, the firm view of the Islamic tradition itself, which considers the Qur'ān as we know it to be the exact, literal transcription of God's word as revealed to Muhammad in the seventh century; in the tradition's view, the Qur'ān of today is, in fact, identical with the 'Ur-Qur'ān'.[134]

Let me just say that it should be evident from the above that this is not, in fact, the position of the vast majority of the traditional scholars on this point, even though that position may not be familiar to many today. Rather, the assumption of a single, uniform, 'closed' text which is an 'exact, literal transcription' of the revelation must be replaced by the concept of a multiform text that was revealed and recited according to seven *aḥruf*.

Donner's second question is: 'What was the nature of the original "Ur-Qur'ān", assuming it existed?'[135] Under this rubric he discusses 'the role orality may have played in the formation of the original text', noting that by 'orality', he means the possibility that the text originated as a recited oral performance, as opposed to a written composition, rather than the question of the later oral transmission of the text. He goes on to say:

Neuwirth has recently noted that what she calls "the Qur'ān's intrinsic orality" is reflected in its style. On the basis of purely stylistic characteristics, it has been argued that the Qur'ān is replete with both oral formulas and with folktales.

[133] Fred M. Donner, 'The Qur'ān in Recent Scholarship: Challenges and Desiderata' in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 29–50, at 31.
[134] Ibid, 31.
[135] Ibid, 32.

These observations seem sensible enough, but a question that then needs to be resolved is how the orality of the "Ur-Qurʾān" relates to those theories that emphasize the Qurʾān as a written text, such as those of both Lüling and Luxenberg. Perhaps Daniel Madigan's efforts to understand the meaning of the Qurʾān's use of the word *kitāb* (normally, "book") in a broader and looser manner will help pave the way here, although it appears that many scholars remain to be convinced by his argument.[136]

One would add here that note should indeed be taken of Madigan's excellent study (see above, nn. 123 and 124), and that one does indeed need to de-emphasize the written text away from the theories of both Lüling and Luxenberg.

Donner continues:

The question of orality might also be brought to bear in discussion of Wansbrough's theory of the late stabilization of the Qurʾān text. One of the pillars of his argument is the assertion that various passages of the Qurʾān that relate the same information in very similar, but not quite identical, words and phrases reflect a single text that has evolved over a significant period of time. But, might such similar passages not just as cogently be viewed as transcripts of different *oral* recitations of the same story made in close succession, something like different recordings of a politician's stump speech delivered numerous times over a few days or weeks? For, in such circumstances, one might expect to find exactly the characteristics that Wansbrough has latched onto in his analysis: several passages that treat the same theme using similar, but not quite identical, verbal formulations.[137]

One might add that this is in effect exactly what the tradition assumes: that the Prophet presented—recited—the same material at different times in slightly different ways, as illustrated in numerous examples in the Qurʾān as we have it.

Donner's third question, 'If an original "Ur-Qurʾān" existed, what kind of language did it represent? And what was the relationship between the written text and this language?', while interesting in itself, is not directly relevant to our present enquiry.

The fourth question is: How was the presumed 'Ur-Qurʾān' transmitted? Donner says:

We have already touched on some of the questions regarding the early transmission of the "Ur-Qurʾān" text and how it may have become the Qurʾān we know today. There seems to be general agreement that in the passage from "Ur-Qurʾān" to the Qurʾān text familiar to us now, some editing was performed,

[136] Ibid, 34.
[137] Ibid, 34–5

but whether it was editing merely to make the text reflect unambiguously a well-established recitation, or whether the editing completely transformed the text, intentionally or unintentionally, is still subject to debate.[138]

Again, in the light of our 'seven *aḥruf*' discussion, we would say that it is neither one nor the other, but rather an attempt to maximize an existing degree of multiformity in a medium that is best suited to uniformity.
    Donner refers to

mounting evidence that the Qur'ān text, or parts of it at least, must at some stage in its history have been transmitted in purely written form, without the benefit of a controlling tradition of active recitation. This evidence takes the form of recognizing in the Qur'ānic text misunderstood words, hypercorrected words (the "lectio facilior"), or stray marks which then become incorporated into the recitation, something that could only happen if the oral recitation were derived from the written text rather than the other way round.

[...]

And yet, despite all this converging evidence for written transmission of at least parts of the text, the fact that the Qur'ān was first written in a highly defective script implies that written copies were initially intended to serve only as a memory aid for those who already knew the text by heart, since reading it 'cold' with any accuracy would have been virtually impossible. This suggests that a tradition of oral recitation was assumed by those who made these first written copies. The question of oral vs. written transmission of the Qur'ān text, then, remains a very enigmatic issue and one with potentially profound implication for our understanding of the origins and history of the text.[139]

Firstly, the 'mounting evidence' of which Donner speaks turns out in all instances to be highly speculative, where 'mistakes' and 'misreadings' are assumed on the basis of a researcher's feeling that another reading is more likely, or better than, the received text.[140] Secondly, we would say

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[138] Ibid, 40.
[139] Ibid, 40–1.
[140] Donner refers to the work of Samir Khalil Samir, James Bellamy, and himself. See Samir Khalil Samir, 'The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur'ān: A Reflection' in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London and New York; Routledge, 2008), 141–62, at 159; J. A. Bellamy, 'Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113 (1993): 562–73 ('mistakes': 562, 563, 573)); id., 'More Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran', *JAOS*, 116 (1996): 196–204 ('misread': 196; 'mistake': 198, 199, 201); id., 'Textual Criticism of the

that the evidence of the *qirāʾāt* points neither to a transmission of 'the Qurʾān text, or parts of it at least … in purely written form', nor, indeed, a transmission in purely oral form, but one where the written form is present alongside, and interacting with, oral transmission. (We recall, for instance, readings such as *idh adbara* and *idhā dabara* which suggest options from a written model.) We note also that, in the case of early Arabic poetry, it was considered normal for those reading from a written text to 'correct it with their tongues'. Thus we hear of Ibn Muqbil (d. after 35/656 or 70/690), for instance, saying, 'I send out [my] verses crooked and the transmitters bring them [back] straightened (*innī la-ursilu l-buyūta ʿūjan fa-taʾtī l-ruwātu bi-hā qad aqāmathā*)'.[141] With regard to the Qurʾān, we are told that ʿUthmān, when he was shown the *muṣḥaf*s that he had had copied out, noticed some 'errors' (*laḥn*) (from the context one assumes that it is either grammatical anomalies and/or anomalous spellings that are intended) but told the scribes not to make any changes, as 'the Arabs will correct them (*tuʿarribuhā*) with their tongues', or in another version 'will straighten them (*tuqīmuhā*) with their tongues'.[142] It is presumably on this basis that we find Abū ʿAmr among the Ten, for instance, reading *inna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni* (Q. 20. 63), using the (expected) accusative after *inna*, whereas the others read *hādhāni*, which accords with how the word is written without a *yāʾ* in the *muṣḥaf*.[143] Similarly, he read *fa-ʾaṣṣaddaqa wa-akūna* (Q. 63. 10) with both verbs in the (expected) subjunctive, whereas the others read the second verb as *wa-akun*, which accords with how the word is written

Koran', *JAOS*, 121 (2001): 1–6 ('misreading/s': 1, 6; 'mistakes': 2); id., 'A Further Note on ʿĪsā', *JAOS*, 122 (2002): 587–8; and Fred Donner, 'Quranic *furqān*', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 52 (2007): 279–300 ('misreading': 279). Some of Bellamy's suggestions, including some featured in earlier articles by him (i.e. J. A. Bellamy, 'The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the Basmalah', *JAOS*, 93 (1973): 267–85; id., 'Al-Raqīm or al-Ruqūd? A Note on Sūrah 18:9', *JAOS*, 111 (1991): 115–17; id., 'Fa-Ummuhu Hāwiyah: A Note on Sūrah 101:9', *JAOS*, 112 (1992): 485–7) have in turn been reconsidered, and in several cases rejected, by Devin Stewart ('Notes on Medieval and Modern Emendations of the Qurʾān' in Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*, 225–48, at 233–7), who also acknowledges (22) that, for him, 'the test of validity [i.e. of an emendation] comes down to *sukūn al-nafs* "ease of mind".'

[141] For this, and similar examples, see Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 66–7; id., *Genesis*, 19–20.

[142] Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh al-Madīna*, iii. 1013; Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 41–2; al-Dānī, *Muqniʿ*, 119, 121. Cf. Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 78.

[143] See Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 419; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 296; Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 77–8; id., *Genesis*, 34.

without a *wāw* in the *muṣḥaf*.[144] It is certainly the case that the 'extra' *wāw*s and *alif*s in the spellings of words such as *la-ʾadhbaḥannahu* (Q. 27. 21) (seemingly written *lā ʾadhbaḥannahu*), *la-ʾawḍaʿū* (Q. 9. 47) (seemingly written *lā ʾawḍaʿū*), *sa-ʾurīkum* (Q. 7. 145 and 21. 37) (seemingly written *sa-ʾūrīkum*) are not pronounced by any of the readers although these words are always written with their 'extra' letters in the *muṣḥaf*.[145]

Donner's fifth question is: How and when did codification and canonization of the Qurʾān take place? To this he says:

On the issue of the Qurʾān's codification, we seem in fact to be faced with contradictory information, and find ourselves perhaps in something akin to the position of physicists, who are unable to choose definitively between the theory that understands light as a wave phenomenon and another that understands it as a particle phenomenon, because each theory explains some of the empirically observable characteristics of light. The available evidence on the Qurʾān's codification, similarly, seems to provide support for both the early codification and the late-codification hypotheses:

(a) on the one hand, we know that there are large numbers of *qirāʾāt* or variant readings of the Qurʾān [...] The existence of the variant readings shows that we cannot conceptualize the Qurʾān as a text that crystallized into a single, immutable codified form at an early date (e.g. within one generation of Muhammad), even though each of the regional traditions appears to go back to a single regional archetype. We have to assume that various individuals and subcommunities used different variant texts, and continued to do so for centuries. (Indeed, the variants still exist and are used.)

(b) On the other hand, even those who champion most ardently the idea that the Qurʾān text lacked stability for a long time and was not codified at an early date must in turn acknowledge that the instability of the text was confined within very strict limits. While there are some significant variants in the *qirāʾāt* literature, we do not find long passages of otherwise wholly unknown text claiming to be Qurʾān, or that appear to be used as Qurʾān—only variations within a text that is clearly recognizable as a version of a known Qurʾānic passage. Some early exemplars of the Qurʾān place a few suras in an order different from the usual one, but we do not find pieces of a particular sura detached from their context and embedded in a totally different sura. This implies that, despite the text's manifest instability on one level, it has an underlying stability on a deeper level that cannot be accidental. Rather, this 'deep' stability suggests that, on that level and within

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[144] See Ibn Mujāhid, *Sabʿa*, 637; Ibn Mihrān, *Mabsūṭ*, 437; al-Dānī, *Muqniʿ*, 117.

[145] See ibid, 59, 120.

those limits, the Qur'ān did coalesce and acquire the status of an especially revered sacred text—a canon—quite early in the life of the community.[146]

From our earlier considerations, I would suggest that point (a) reflects the seven-*aḥruf* aspect of the form of the Qur'ān, while point (b) reflects the one-meaning aspect of the content of the Qur'ān (as in Ibn Shihāb's comment *fī l-amri yakūnu wāḥidan*).

Finally, Donner goes on to opine that

There can be no doubt that the most cherished dream of anyone who works with the Qur'ān—whether academic specialist or believing Muslim (not, of course, exclusive categories)—would be the preparation of a truly critical edition of the text: that is, an edition that, working from the evidence provided by the earliest manuscript sources, comes as close as scientifically possible to the exact wording and vocalization of the original text—the Ur-Qur'ān. But no sooner do we make this statement than, in the light of what we have just discussed, we realize how problematic it is.

It will be clear from our deliberations above that not only is this not possible, but also that it is not necessary: the necessary editing work has already been done in the time of 'Uthmān, with minor adjustments at the time of al-Ḥajjāj and a further simplification of possibilities through the activities of those such as Ibn Mujāhid, Ibn Ghalbūn and Ibn Mihrān in their description of—in these particular cases—Seven, Eight and Ten Readings respectively. This is not to say that the last word has been said on the history of the Qur'ānic text and its manuscript tradition—far from it—but, for the earliest period at any rate, it needs to be done on a different set of assumptions, where multiformity is given the foregrounding it deserves.

[146] Donner, 'Recent Scholarship', pp. 42–3.